Drag-On Dragoon

A collection of Drakengard novellas

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PART I

Drakengard

*Note: The following novellas take place before the events of *Drakengard*, and contain story elements that could be considered spoilers for the game's narrative. Read at your own risk.

Caim’s Novella

Burning in the flames of revenge, he becomes a demon of battle...

“When did the gears first deviate from their course.....?”

It was not something Caim could ask himself. Surrounded by his strict yet caring father, his kind mother and his sweet and lovely younger sister, he led a happy life in those days. His childhood friend and swordfighting rival, Inuart, eventually became his brother-in-law. Someday he would succeed his father in governance of the kingdom of Caerleon, and he'd appoint Inuart onto his staff--he held dreams such as this.

However, for the Caim of today, there is nothing.

In retrospect, the incident that occurred the day before that terrible tragedy could very well have been an omen. During their usual sword practice, Inuart accidentally managed to injure Caim. Fortunately, it was a shallow wound and Caim laughed it off as his friend's enthusiasm for their training.

However, Furiae did not. She scolded Inuart with a surprisingly threatening attitude and the defeated Inuart, with an unpleasant look on his face, took his leave of the place. Although glad, Furiae's brother was inwardly troubled. "Well, maybe I should talk with her about it later"-- So thinking, Caim led his younger sister - who was so worried it seemed she would burst into tears any moment - back into the castle. However, the complex look he'd seen in Inuart's eyes as he left, was something that the Caim of this moment had no reason to understand.

And the next day, the tragedy occurred.

That spectacle was something he would probably never be able to forget. His father's body being slowly crunched between the ugly teeth of the black dragon that had suddenly attacked the castle, his mother's body easily pierced by its gigantic claws-- All of this happened in the blink of an eye. Having accomplished its goal, the black dragon glanced at Caim and his sister before calmly flying away from that place.

Caim howled. And he continued to raise his voice as he howled to the point his lungs would surely give out. How long he stayed like this is unknown. Suddenly coming back to himself, Caim saw by his side, overwhelmed with surprise and despair, Furiae was standing in a daze, having forgotten how to scream or to cry. Caim pulled her into an embrace. He noticed then that Furiae was trembling all over, and hugged her even tighter--

Six years have passed since then. Family, friends, and home, no longer exist. Caim has nothing now but daily combat. With unaffected determination, he kills his opponents. The thrill of battle helps him forget reality. Now, "revenge" has for Caim become an excuse with which to kill his opponents. Anger flows through his body. And always, his heart is empty as the void.

Furiae's Novella

Having severed relations with earthly life, the goddess lives in suffering...

The goddess's daily life is filled with tedium.

Mornings, she wakes up in the ever-gloomy house, and together with Verdelet lifts up prayers to God. As day breaks, she finishes a frugal meal, after which there is nothing particular for her to do. When she'd just become the goddess, scriptures and theology books and the like were placed in her room, and she'd looked through them out of idle curiosity. However, as the contents of each and every one of them was nothing but stiff and formal text, she quickly lost interest. The furnishings were extremely modest, the stiffness of the bed surprising her more than anything. The room was equipped with all the necessities of daily life, but there was not one object that could possibly be considered good for amusement. As a princess who had been raised in an environment devoid of discomfort, life as the goddess was akin to torture. "But the fact of the matter is that I chose this life myself"-- So Furiae bit back her complaints.

She didn't want to remember it ever again--and yet, even now when she closed her eyes the scene of that tragic day would rise unbidden to her mind, the scene that had changed everything. Her kind and cheerful brother had become someone who brooded most of the day, and rarely ever smiled. She sometimes heard screams coming from his room in the dead of night. The next day, if asked about it, Caim would answer only with--"I had a bad dream." Furiae could not give her aid to such a brother.

Inuart, Furiae's fiancée, worried over them as well, and came to visit countless times. However, even the sound of his harp-playing could no longer move her heart to the degree that it once had. Before she knew it, she too had begun to close the doors of her heart, just like her brother Caim.

A year after the tragedy, the siblings were separated from their country. Inuart had invited her to go with him, but Furiae was worried, having seeing Caim's condition up-close, and could not afford to leave him alone. However, that may have been an excuse of her own making. Her true feelings spoke thus, though she was not entirely aware of it herself. "I don't want to be separated from Brother!"

However, immediately upon starting their journey away from the country, something unusual arose within Furiae's body. Pain wracked the girl's body, and the "mark" of the goddess appeared--. Becoming the goddess meant isolation from the world. If this were to happen, she would never be able to meet her brother or Inuart again. For Furiae, this was a fate too cruel to bear. "Why must I be the only one caught in such a--"

Several days after the "mark" had appeared, Furiae decided to become the goddess. She told her brother this in her usual peaceful tone, with her mouth even shaped into a smile. However, those eyes were terrifyingly empty. That was only natural. At the age of only 14, the girl was forced to give up everything--.

Inuart's Novella

Single-minded desire begins to devour him unaware--

In the moonlight shining through the window of his room, a solitary young man was lost in thought. The young man, with his lean and well-trained body, good looks and longish red hair, was a great man who could certainly arrest the eyes of all the women he passed by in town. However, contrary to his awe-inspiring, manly appearance, his thoughts were sunk into a dark depression.

--He wanted to go back to that time. Caim treated him with affection, without an atom of regard for the difference in social statuses. And Furiae was always beside the two, smiling softly at the two. Hampered by the weight of his furiously beating heart, he stumbled over his words countless times in an attempt to confess his love, and when Furiae responded with a blush, he felt as if he had risen to heaven. Everything shone, in those days.

However--something began to change after that horrific tragedy. With Caim having closed off his heart after his parents were killed before his eyes, Furiae worried over her brother, to the point that whenever she and Inuart were together her mind was in another place entirely.....Inuart, in order to be helpful to them where he could, helped his father Ipris - who had taken over administrative duties - in his work. Despite this, a year after Gaap's death, Ipris died of illness. The three people he had left behind in adversity thus decided to leave the country.

The grief at the loss of his father was great, but within Inuart's heart was the secretively joyful thought "This way I can finally be together with Furiae" - but his expectations failed when the hard reality was thrust before him. Rather than being Inuart's fiancee, Furiae chose to stay with her brother Caim. While he accepted this with apparent calmness, Inuart was inwardly shaken and discouraged to an immeasurable degree. "Why must she choose Caim over me!" Inuart's heart was filled with whirling jealousy, and as he cursed himself for his inability to support them, he sat alone in the now-empty palace, playing his harp. Having lost Furiae whom he'd loved, the man had nothing left to his name but his songs. And, immediately afterwards, when the "mark" appeared on Furiae, his fiancee went somewhere his hands could never reach. Inuart's dreams of a brilliant future had been lost for all eternity.

Several years after that. In this disturbed age, Inuart spent his days fighting as a member of the Union Army. The sword skills he'd once forged together with Caim now served more useful than ever in this environment. However, his heart was constantly troubled by his thoughts.

"If I had even more power, then Furiae would--- I wish for power!"

--A dog's howl could be heard from somewhere, snapping the young man out of his thoughts. Inuart slowly raised his body from the bed, taking his harp from where it lay against the wall, and quietly began to play. That melancholy tune did not cease until dawn.

Seere’s Novella

The boy with eternal youth becomes the owner of a pure spirit...

"I loved only you....."

Seere opened his eyes when he felt his mother's presence.

"Mother! Mother where are you? If you're here then answer me!" But of course instead of his mother's figure, the boy's worried gaze found only Golem there. Seere, crestfallen, lowered his head, and mumbled to himself with a great sigh.

"A dream again....."

Ever since that day, his mother would always appear in his dreams without fail when he slept. Kind and beautiful Mother, Mother who loved only me--- But that mother wasn't here anymore. His father as well had died. Seere was all alone.

"Seere, alone, wrong."

Having read his thoughts, Golem humbly protested. Seere floated a smile, holding onto the craggy body, and pressed his cheek to his only friend in the world as he replied.

"That's right, isn't it. Thank you, Golem."

So saying, he extended his tiny arms as far as he could and embraced Golem's gigantic leg, staying like that for a short moment. Mother used to always embrace Seere like this. Mother's breast was warm, and soft, and smelled very nice. Since I'm tiny I can't do it like that, but Golem is an important friend. So I want to give him a hug, just the way Mother used to---. And so, like that, before he knew it Seere had fallen asleep.

Having noticed the faint breathing that signified sleep, Golem's great hand moved slowly, gently placing Seere's little body on the soft meadowland beneath the shade of a rock. That movement seemed very much in appearance like that of a mother towards her own child, filled with a deep affection.

---The next morning, when Seere opened his eyes, Golem's figure was not by his side as he had expected.

"Golem? Golem!"

At his involuntary shout, Golem's figure slowly appeared from the shade of the rocks a short ways off. Seere was relieved, but also wondered what Golem had been doing.

"Found, same smell, as Seere."

Seere was taken aback by those words. Right now, the two of them were near the valley that his long-lost sister Manah had been abandoned in. Golem, with its monster's sense of smell, must have caught his sister's scent. Manah, who had received not one bit of Mother's love. Seere, living in a haze of love from his mother, had forgotten about his sister. And finally Manah was---

"I have to find Manah. And then, I have to apologize---"

Seere slowly stood up. Within his eyes shone the strong light of determination.

Arioch's Novella

Despair transformed the lone housewife into a monstrous murderer.

Recently the serial murderer that had so troubled society was captured--this news spread like wildfire across the kingdom of Niflheim. Moreover, the fact that the perpetrator was a perfectly ordinary elven housewife gave the people a great shock. Considering the fact that she'd aimed only at children, several victims had already come out, and so when the chance came to see this cruel figure, everyone gathered to see her profile.

Word having spread that the criminal, named Arioch, was being transferred from the town jail to a prison in the desert, crowds of people lined the streets to catch a glimpse of this bizarre figure who had committed such an unprecedented crime.

"I bet she's a monster woman that looks like an ogre."

"Nah, I heard she looks like a 300-year-old granny."

The crowd was filled with such irresponsible rumors. However, when the criminal appeared, led by soldiers of the Imperial Army, her figure completely defied their expectations. What appeared was not a monster nor a decrepit old witch, but an incredibly ordinary, yet beautiful young elven woman. The "hideously atrocious female cutthroat" that the crowd had been expecting was nowhere to be found. The previously raucous crowd went quiet one by one, as if they had all been caught in a still photograph, and the place was wrapped in a bizarre sort of silence. For these people, the criminal who had murdered defenseless innocents time and time again, and the elf woman before their eyes, were two beings they could not manage to connect no matter how hard they tried.

There was nothing but the sound of soldiers' footsteps echoing as the crowd sent them off, swallowing their collective breaths. However, Arioch saw nothing of what was going on around her. Held by sturdy soldiers on both sides, walking as if she were being dragged, she muttered the same words over and over again.

"My children...delicious children."

--Even when her body was tightly bound, and she was placed into the prison, Arioch did not resist once, so docile that her jailers were unnerved. The girl did not seem to understand at all what was happening to her. Where is this place? Where did my adorable children go? Give me.....give me back my children!

Suddenly, Arioch let out a scream that seemed to resound throughout the entire prison. A jailer holding a gag rushed into the prison as fast as he could, at the hair-raising noise. He must have been negligent due to her meekness back then. When the jailer moved to place the gag in her mouth, Arioch snapped at him with blinding speed. And the next instant--she'd bitten his fingers off without the slightest hesitation. This time, it was the jailer's scream that echoed throughout the halls. The girl smiled as if satisfied, leisurely swallowing the object in her mouth.

Leonard's Novella

His unique inclinations torment the fastidious hermit

It happened shortly before Leonard went through puberty. His friends had already gone through the change in voice themselves, and little by little Leonard went through that change from boy to adult as well. When the boys around that age gathered together, talk would naturally turn to "gossip" about the opposite sex. Which girl is cute, no I think that girl's nice--- In the midst of his friends' excitement in their childish arguments, Leonard alone had no interest in such tedious chatter. If they were to talk about the girls they liked, it was a single boy's profile that filled his gaze.

This flaxen-haired boy stood out among his friends as having particularly handsome features. When Leonard gazed at him, a mysteriously warm feeling rose up in his chest. What a beautiful face that is--- At that moment, having felt his gaze, the boy suddenly turned and spoke to Leonard.

"Come to think of it, how about you, Leonard?"

Taken off-guard as he was, Leonard could say nothing at the moment, blushing as he turned his gaze downwards. Seeing him like that, his friends laughed at the strange guy, then turned back to their talk of the opposite sex. While Leonard mentally breathed a sigh of relief, it became clear to him then that he was different from his friends.

Nearly 20 years have passed since then. This unique disposition---this love of boys continued to torment Leonard, and he began living in the forest as a hermit. At first he had separated from his family and lived alone, but because of their being chased by the Imperial Army, he now gave shelter to his three younger brothers. Of course, not a single person in his family knew about his leanings. However, he could no longer restrain the desire that had heaped upon itself over the years, and would sneak into the woods behind the house to pleasure himself outside his brothers' notice--- thus he passed the days. "I cannot do this forever!" Coming home from the woods, he would think this each time he saw his brothers' faces, but ultimately he succumbed to the weakness of his own heart. Then the fated day came---

That day as usual, when it got dark, Leonard quietly snuck out of the house. With the pain of corruption stinging in his chest, and filled with expectations of pleasure, he quickened his pace as he headed towards the forest. Then, when Leonard's figure had completely vanished into the woods, soldiers with eerily glowing red eyes gathered before his house. His brothers, who noticed them outside the window, each called out for their brother to help them. But those voices would never reach Leonard's ears---

Leonard thought: That time, I should have been the one to die. But he had survived. Unable to even find a place to die, the blind hermit continues to wander aimlessly---

Verdelet’s Novella

The man of god who hides inner conflict within his heart....

Verdelet was worried. While he had the title of hierarch, sometimes, he lost his understanding of God's true motives. Of course, even if he was hierarch he was still no more than a single human being, and could not expect to foresee everything God willed. However, recent incidents had far surpassed Verdelet's understanding. The Cult of the Watchers, the Imperial Army, and the goddess Furiae. What in the world was God hoping for?

Verdelet gazed at the adjoining room as he took a break from his writings. Beyond the single wall that separated them, was the present goddess Furiae's living room. Thinking of her, Verdelet felt an ache in his chest. At the tender age of 13, having still to recover from the trauma of seeing her parents slaughtered before her eyes, the girl had been separated from her brother and fiance--- Verdelet could not help but think that God had dealt her far too cruel a blow. When he first met Furiae, there had been an emptiness in her eyes not at all typical of a 14-year-old girl, the mere memory of which sent a shiver through his spine. She certainly appeared to be a pitiful girl on the outside, but the air she gave was entirely like that of an old woman on the verge of death. Furiae was---a hollow shell.

As hierarch, Verdelet's duty was to ensure the safety of the goddess. Until now, the goddesses he had worked with would be obstinate at first, but many of them would open up towards him over time. However, Furiae was different. It had already been several years since she became the goddess, and yet he could count the number of times she had spoken to him on one hand. Of course, when he spoke to her she never failed to reply. But her tone stayed quiet, and not once could a sign of emotion be felt from her. Verdelet had now given up on all attempts to open her heart.

At a time like this, if the dragon were here--- His thoughts always found themselves wandering towards this conclusion. He had immense power, and had gained respect from a great many people as hierarch, but in truth, this was a dreadfully lonely existence. If Verdelet gave a single command, tens of thousands of people would lay down their lives to carry it out, no matter how trivial. But more than that, what he really wanted was a single companion with which he could converse as an equal. Before, the one to carry that role had been the dragon that was his pact partner. But the dragon had fossilized long ago, and fallen into eternal sleep--- A long sigh escaped from Verdelet's mouth.

News of the war seemed to be coming in every day, notifying them that danger was approaching the castle they currently resided in. It seemed the day was not far away that he and the goddess would be living a life of vagrancy together. I wonder if I will be able to protect the goddess when that time comes

"Oh God, give me strength!"

He let out an involuntary prayer, but there was no response.

The Song of Fourteen Years

You are the light. The light that illuminates my world.

A capricious wavering prism.

Inuart brought his sword down from overhead with every last ounce of his might, but Caim deflected it easily. They were childhood friends only four years apart, Caim being on the cusp of eighteen and Inuart having just turned fourteen, yet the gulf between them enormous and could be seen clearly in the differences between their heights, builds and most of all, strength. This, along with Caim's uncanny skill with the sword, made it impossible for Inuart to ever best him. His breathing ragged, Inuart spied Furiae out of the corner of his eye. Caim's younger sister, she was observing their match from where she stood a little deeper into the garden.

(I'm going to lose to Caim in front of Furiae again!)

Soaked with sweat beneath his chain mail, the voice of Inuart's father rang in his ears:

“Rejoice, my son! His Majesty wishes you and Princess Furiae to be wed!”

This was the news Inuart’s father, Ipris, had stopped to tell him as he was on his way to meet Caim that morning. Ipris had long enjoyed a relationship with King Gaap that was far more intimate than that between a monarch and his vassal. You might have called them best friends. Thanks to that, Inuart had the privilege of growing up alongside Caim and Furiae as if they were family. But even so, for the eighth in the line of the great kings of Caerleon to express so plainly his desire for Ipris’ son to marry his daughter… there could be no greater honor. It was no wonder Ipris’ face was positively beaming.

(But Father… what if Furiae doesn’t want to be wed to a weakling like me?)

Inuart’s doubts clouded his focus and created a great many openings in his training session with Caim. The prince’s sharp eyes did not let the trembling of his opponent’s sword go unnoticed, and in a moment Caim’s sword was at Inuart’s throat. Surprised, Inuart’s gauntleted hands shot up and knocked again Caim’s hilt. While the impact was light, it was enough to cause Inuart to drop his weapon completely. He watched in a daze as the broadsword he had begged his father to buy him pierced the ground.

(I am weak.)

“Are you unhurt?” Caim asked concernedly. Inuart ignored both him and the equally concerned Furiae who had come rushing over to check on them. Pulling his sword out of the earth, he hurried out of the garden, as if to escape. The only thing he was grateful for was that King Gaap, who had been the one to teach the sword to both he and Caim, was away touring neighboring countries and not been there to witness what had happened.

Returning to his family’s mansion, Inuart wished to be alone in his room and so dismissed all the servants nearby. After he had made sure their footsteps were far enough away, he began removing his clothes. Fully naked, he felt the gentle wind blowing in from the stone window on his bare skin. The faint rays of sunlight softened the shadows, and while listening to the chirping of the birds in the tree outside, Inuart began to scrutinize his whole body, from the top of his head to the tips of his toes.

(My hair… I hate how curly and red it is.)

Inuart clicked his tongue at the thought of Caim’s black hair which, no matter how much of a sweat he’d build up during training, soon went back to being silky and straight.

(And my skin… why have I been so slow in growing body and facial hair?)

Wanting to at least become a little less pale, Inuart had tried sunbathing in the garden as Caim often did. All he’d ended up with was a bad sunburn, and once the skin had come peeling off, he saw that underneath he was as white as ever.

(My arms and legs… they’re so stupidly skinny. Why can’t I build more muscle? I swing my sword a thousand times every morning just as Caim does, and yet my chest is not a fraction as broad…)

Imagining Caim's body, slim but perfectly sculpted, Inuart felt pangs of jealousy.

(And why am I not getting any taller? At this rate, forget about catching up to Caim… I'm in danger of being outgrown by Furiae!)

Inuart hated his body which bore little difference to that of the girl one year his junior.

(Aren't I a man? I'm supposed to be a man! I want to be a man…)

Caim and Furiae had both comforted him, saying he'd become an adult by the end of the summer, but he took their words as meaning they still considered him a child now.

(At least my voice finally changed…)

Inuart thought as he gingerly stroked his throat.

(I want to hurry and become an adult… a man. A man worthy of Furiae.)

Inuart cast his eyes down toward his nether regions. Of all the things that troubled him about his body, foremost among them was the fact that the appendage that signified him most as a man was still that of a boy's.

"You child!"

He spat at himself before putting his clothes back on.

All dressed, Inuart approached his desk, removing a small glass bottle full of amber liquid from one of its drawers. He held the bottle up to the light, carefully inspecting its contents before removing the cork and taking a sniff. Steeling himself, he downed it all in one go. Once he had, though, he began to cough furiously. Frantically he reached for the silver water pitcher as he continued to hack. Grasping the handle, he drank straight from the spout, water pouring all down his face and neck.

"By Gods, that was bitter!"

Inuart twisted his mouth, tears running down his eyes and snot pouring from his nose.

"But with this…"

Chuckling, Inuart took out a sheet of sturdy parchment paper and placed in on the surface of his desk. Preparing ink and a quill, he focused intently on the blank page. After giving his face a rough rub, he hunched over and began writing breathlessly. The ink splashed on his clothing and face, but this did not slow his hand.

I want to become a man worthy of being at your side.
I am a lost puppy, nipping at your heels.
Show me the way home with your kiss.

— From "Labyrinth of Dreams"

That evening, at the stroke of midnight, Inuart awoke to feelings of intense nausea. As soon as he'd sat up, he vomited that night's dinner all over his bed.

"Someone… help…"

He called out in a strained voice. His vision was blurry, his trembling fingertips as cold as ice, and chills raced up and down his spine. Even after he had vacated the entirety of what was in his stomach, he continued retching yellowish bile.

The servant who first found him in this state feared he may have been poisoned, which caused enough of a panic that soon Inuart's father had appeared on the scene. Ignoring the acrid smell of vomit, he approached his son who lay crouched on all fours, immobile. Gently lowering him down to the ground, Ipris ordered the servants to change the bedsheets.

"What happened? Did you eat something off the floor?"

"I'm not a dog…!"

Inuart protested weakly, burying his aching head in the knees he had gathered to his chest. Looking at the concerned and sleepy-looking faces of his servants, the family doctor and his father were worsening his sense of vertigo.

"I… I drank some medicine."

As soon as he said this, a sharp-eyed servant discovered the small bottle in his desk which still had some amber liquid left in it. The doctor took it from him.

"Master Inuart, what manner of medicine is this? I don't remember prescribing you any."

"It's… growth medicine."

"Growth medicine?"

"Yes. It's supposed to promote growth! It comes from the far east… I bought it from Jan's shop."

"Did you say Jan? You can't trust anything you buy from that charlatan!"

The doctor chided Inuart as if he were simple. He then began to read the label of the bottle aloud:

"Effects: Increased height, hair growth… lengthening of the male member…? Warnings: For use by men only… women are not to ingest… Ingredients:… ah, now I see. It's no wonder you got sick. This is no medicine, Master Inuart. I'm afraid Jan pulled one over on you."

Sounds of laughter and scorn were mixed in the murmuring of the servants. Inuart's face flushed red. Remembering how he had donned a fake beard and big hat to sneak out to Jan's shop, he thought himself a sorry fool. In the end he was still a child, one who knew nothing of the world. Seeing his son's shoulders slump, Ipris ordered everyone to leave. After thanking them for their help, he had the sense of press a few coins into their hands to insure their silence.

Returning to the room, Ipris folded his arms and firmed his expression.

“Inuart. It is true that for a lad of fourteen, you are on the small side. But puberty has only just begun for you. Even Lord Caim, at fifteen, still looked very much a child. There is no need for you to be so harried.”

Inuart was expecting to be scolded for embarrassing both himself and his father, so was taken off-guard by Ipris’ gentle words. All the more so when the man kneeled down beside him and placed a hand on his back.

“Are you feeling better? You have a bit of a fever. Take a break from sword training tomorrow… well, I should say today, as it’s past midnight. I’ll inform Lord Caim that you’re feeling under the weather.”

“Take a break…?” Inuart whispered, and began shaking his head frantically. “No! I can’t! If I miss a single day, Caim will be that much further ahead of me! The distance between us is already so large! I couldn’t bear to give him more of an advantage! I couldn’t bear it!”

Ipris watched, exasperated, as his son through a tantrum. Suddenly, though, he got an idea.

“Wait here.”

He said before ducking out of the room. Soon he had returned with an unfamiliar instrument in tow. Before Inuart could ask what they were, Ipris was pressing it into his hands.

“This is a harp. In my youth, I used it to win your mother’s hand.”

“You got mother to marry you by playing music?!” Inuart exclaimed. He could hardly believe it, but Ipris nodded.

“Listen well, Inuart. It is not the sword that captures a woman’s heart. Nay, it is song.” Ipris gave one of the strings of the harp Inuart held a pluck with his finger. A sweet sound filled the air, and Inuart’s eyes widened as the delicateness of it. Soon he was running his fingers over the strings himself.

“Amazing! Listen to how the notes follow after each other, as if in chase. Truly amazing!”

Seeing the sparkle in his son’s eyes, Ipris smiled, satisfied.

“Inuart, have confidence in yourself. I believe you have been blessed by the god of music.”

“What do you mean…?”

“Your voice can give wings to those notes, and if you add your poetry to them, they may reach deep into the hearts of those who listen. What I mean to say is, you may well have a natural gift.”

“M-my poetry…? Father, you read them? Without even asking?”

Inuart’s face was alternately turning blue and red, but Ipris only responded by handing him a book of instructions on how to play.

“Take today off to rest and become better acquainted with your harp.” "But…” Inuart trailed off, his eyes on the instrument. “…no matter how good I get at playing this harp, it won’t help my sword work. It won’t help me beat Caim…”

Ipris, who had been making to leave, stopped at the door. He turned his eyes on Inuart and his gaze was impassive, containing neither kindness nor anger.

“Do not fight battles you cannot win.”

“W-what…?”

“Lord Caim wields his sword not for himself, but for his country. But at the moment, you brandish yours only for yourself. No matter how violently you swing such a selfish sword, it can never hope to defeat one that was drawn in the name of peace.”

“I don’t… I don’t understand!”

Ipris gave his stammering son a magnanimous smile.

“I pray you never truly will. But commit my words to memory all the same, for they are true. Take it from your father, whose blade once thirsted only for blood…”

Even Inuart could plainly tell the truth and conviction behind Ipris’ words were real. Yet he also felt that conviction was something his father had gained by virtue of being further along in life, of being in possession of many more experiences… and no longer in danger of having to feel the pains of adolescence ever again. As such, the his fourteen year old ears, they came off as being cavalier, and he found himself repulsed by them.

(Father, how do you expect me to understand any of that? I don’t want to!)

After his father had left, Inuart dug his nails so hard into the skin of his balled fists, they drew blood. His heart seemed ready to burst, it was so full of emotions he could not express and dared not inspect too closely.

(It hurts… it hurts! How can I stop this pain? Should I scream? Break something? Swing my sword? No…)

It did not take long for it to occur to Inuart that he could express his anger through song.

I despise adults! Yet I long to become one!
In my hypocrisy alone do I resemble one.
Down with grown-ups!

— From “How Long Will My Torture (Puberty) Go On?”

Before Inuart had realized, the sun was high in the sky. Yet he was far too absorbed in playing to feel tired or hungry. At first he sang only to quell his raging heart, but the more he did sing the more the tension left his body. Inuart had already become able to play the harp adequately with just a flip through the instructional book. Soon he had completely memorized which strings made what sounds, and what sort of strokes produced the nicest sounds. It all came to him with an astounding naturalness. It was an experience entirely different compared to how he struggled to learn the sword, strategy and how to ride a horse. Despite the huge amount of effort he put into those things, in terms of natural ability he always found himself below Caim and this had left him quite bitter. Yet it was the opposite with song. For the first time in his life, Inuart felt a sense of superiority and pride which greatly excited him.

(This is fun! Singing is fun! I feel so alive!)

Suddenly, the sound of soft clapping echoed throughout the room. Inuart stopped playing and turned to see the silent spectator who had been listening in on his performance for some time. In her hands she held a bouquet of fresh flowers, the scent of which tickled his nostrils.

“Furiae?!”

“I’m sorry if I surprised you. I came to visit, since I’d heard you were sick.”

Furiae lowered her eyes shyly, sinking her face into the bouquet. Her glossy brown hair, so similar to Caim’s, cascaded down her face and neck.

“You came by yourself?”

“Yes. Brother had his sovereign studies to attend to, so…”

Inuart often forgot it, but in truth the burden on Caim’s shoulders as prince was extremely heavy. Due to King Gaap’s generous nature, the three children had grown up like siblings, but in truth both Caim and Furiae were of much greater station.

“How long were you standing there? Did you… hear me singing?”

Inuart scratched his head awkwardly, cheeks red. Furiae gave a nod, her face blushing too.

“I did. They were beautiful… really.”

While Furiae’s praise was heartfelt, it pained Inuart to hear it. Among the songs he’d been singing, there had been those overflowing with raw desire for the innocent girl. To think they had reached her ears made him want to disappear on the spot.

“Please… my songs, they are… dirty. Not fit to be heard…”

After hearing his words, Furiae tilted her head slightly, as if in thought. Then she smiled a smile utterly unlike any Inuart had seen on her face before. It was that of an adult, and dangerously bewitching.

“I don’t mind. I am rather dirtied, myself…” She whispered.

Time froze. Inuart's eyes were fixed on Furiae's. Likewise, hers were set on Inuart's. He saw in their reflection the sight of his own face, which looked worn due to lack of sleep. He also realized for the first time that he was still in his night clothes. Suddenly he became much more preoccupied with his appearance than with Furiae's enigmatic words.

Watching as he began to straighten his clothes self-consciously, the raw expression on Furiae's face which had exposed the woman growing with her was painted over by her usual lovely smile. At the same time, the sudden intimacy that had sparked between them became less intense.

Furiae handed Inuart the bouquet of flowers she had likely picked from the garden herself.

"I enjoyed your songs. If you wouldn't mind, I'd love to hear them again…" She said in a voice just barely audible.

Inuart dared to look back into Furiae's eyes and saw they were still reflecting him. They did not shine the same way as when she beheld her brother, but it was clear that she was regarding him differently than she had just moments before.

(Could it be that, in Furiae's heart… I have become a man?)

Gripping his harp, Inuart gave her a smile.

"Of course I don't mind. I will play for you… I will sing for your sake. Whenever you want, and for as long as you desire…"

The next day, Inuart was again facing off against Caim in the garden. While still nimbly parrying his blows, Caim remarked:

"You're becoming more skilled!"

"Truly? But I'm still no match for you!"

Panting, Inuart managed to ward off Caim's blade. On the sidelines were King Gaap, having returned from his tour, and Furiae, who was cheering him on while holding his harp.

(That won't always be true, though, Caim. Soon, I'll grow taller. I'll put on lots of muscle, too. It won't happen right away, I know. But soon…)

Caim's left flank was open. This was the first time Inuart had ever perceived any openings in Caim's stance since they had started sparring.

"Yaaah!"

Still, even as he aimed for it, Caim's reflexes won out in the end. His sword got batted back, and the strength of the blow sent Inuart flying backwards. He landed on his back, upon the grass. As he raised his head, he saw Furiae was running to his side. King Gaap had risen from his seat, and Caim was looking in his direction concernedly as he wiped the sweat from his brow.

“I’m all right!” Inuart called out, his voice echoing throughout the wide blue sky. He then quickly jumped back to his feet.

“I can go for another round!” Taking his sword back in hand, Inuart stared Caim down.

(Caim… one day, I’m sure to become stronger than you!)

With a battle cry, Inuart rushed toward Caim. His broadsword, too large for his frame, caught the sunlight and shone brightly.

I won’t give up on what I believe in.
That’s my motto. I swear on the precious memories I share with you…
…that one day, I will know victory!

— From “In Praise of the Future”

PART II

DRAKENGARD 2

*Note: The following story takes place after Ending *A* of *Drakengard 2*, and therefore **contains spoilers** for the game's narrative, read at your own risk.

The Garden of Light

When was the last time I dreamt? Since when had my sleep become dreamless? All sleeping consisted of now was closing my eyes and waiting for my consciousness to fade into a deep, dark chasm…

Eris turned over to avoid the morning light that was pouring onto her face. She had purposefully had her bed moved to the corner where the sun hit the most, for she feared that if not for it she might never awake. Her body's fatigue was not the sort that could be alleviated by a single night's rest, after all.

Sighing, she began concentrating on lifting herself up. Her body was stiff in the mornings and creaked in resistance to every movement, her backbone giving an audible crack. Ignoring the compulsion to fall back into bed, Eris gingerly placed her feet on the floor. Slowly but surely she went through her morning routine, including brushing her hair and putting on her clothes. Sadly, these things made her well out of breath.

(It can't be helped… after all, this body doesn't belong to me anymore.)

Eris was the Goddess, who carried on her the Seal which kept the world from reverting to its original chaotic state. In other words, she was the pillar that upheld the world as humanity knew it. As such, from the moment she took on the role, Eris believed that her body and life were no longer hers alone… even if the pain of the Seal was.

Rising, she began to walk while holding onto the wall. Her every step was heavy. It reminded her of how she used to cross rivers outfitted in heavy armors as part of her training with the Knights of Seal, back when it was still under the command of General Oror. She supposed she was about twelve at the time… maybe slightly younger, since she and Nowe were still squires. By that time Nowe had learned enough of human speech to communicate mostly normally, but he would still sometimes make mistakes. Eris always took care to correct him. It all seemed so nostalgic, now… For a moment, her warm memories flooded out the pain in her chest, but as if in retaliation, it came back more fiercer than ever. Stopping in her tracks, hand still on the wall, she struggled to support her body which was on the verge of collapse.

The Seal manifests itself as a brand upon the Goddess' body that sends continuous currents of pain coursing through it. However, the amount of pain the Seal caused Eris was never constant. It ebbed and flowed, and occasionally she would find herself in the throes of an agony much more intense than usual. Such was the case now. But Eris, thanks to her having been in the service of the Knights since the age of nine and a veteran warrior, knew how to handle pain. There had been many times in her past in which she had to work her way through it to continue brandishing her spear despite injury when battling monsters or quelling civil strife. And while the pain of the Seal was of a different order than that of a mere bodily injury, the methods of coping were about the same. Fear and alarm only worsened things. It was of the utmost importance not to become panicked, and to keep a strong sense of focus in order to concentrate on regulating your breathing. This did not make the pain go away, but made it much easier to endure.

When the convulsions had alleviated a bit and she became able to move, Eris continued walking. If she was too late in getting to the dining room, it would be an inconvenience to those responsible for preparing her meals. Originally the servants wished to bring her food to her room, but Eris would not have it. If she didn't try to walk at least a little, her body would weaken which would make the pain worse. And if she didn't expend any energy, she would lose her appetite entirely; it was already poor as it was. Walking on her own two feet and eating three proper meals… these were the two most important tasks of Eris' day. If she became unable to do even them, she'd know death was near.

(But no. I shall not die.)

Holding her head high, Eris continued putting one foot ahead of the other. Her long day had only just begun…

The Hierarch Seere came to visit her at a little past noon. As the Goddess was largely forbidden from interacting with others, it fell to the Hierarch to see to most of her needs. This was the commandment of old, but as the Hierarch had taken on many more responsibilities since the formation of the Knights of the Seal, Eris was allowed a few servants to look after her. Still, they

were not to engage her any more than was necessary, and so the current Hierarch's role had become that of the Goddess' confidante; someone to talk to and help ease her sense of isolation.

"Good afternoon, Eris."

Hierarch Seere child-like body had not grown at all in the past nine years, but in truth, he was six years Eris' senior.

"How are you feeling today?" He asked.

"Very well, thanks to you visit." Eris replied.

"You're not tired? Is it all right for you to be sitting up?"

His actions reminded her of a little boy fretting over his mother, which made Eris smile. While Seere's unchanging form was surely a source of consternation to himself, it put Eris greatly at ease.

"Yes. Actually, I was planning on taking a stroll once I'd finished reading these prayers."

"Eris… you are amazing."

"I am?"

"You are! You always walk with perfect posture, your head held high. No one would know you were in pain just to look at you. Come to think of it, it was the same back then… when you shrugged off that near fatal wound as if it were nothing."

Seere was speaking of the time Eris had been dealt a serious injury by the former head of the Knights, General Gismor. The cowardly Gismor had used Eris' body as a shield against her friend Nowe's sword. It had been nearly a decade now, but his devastated expression remained fresh in her mind. Seere felt the moment exemplified Eris' hardiness and strength.

"Lord Hierarch, it was thanks to your healing magic that I recovered."

"I don't think so. The wound was deep enough that my magic might very well have had no effect on it. It was because of your vitality and determination were so extraordinary that I was able to save you."

"Yes, well… it would take more than that to do me in!"

Eris said jokingly. That she could still laugh meant the world to her.

"This might sound all wrong… but in a way, I'm glad it was you who became the Goddess. I can think of no one else who could bear the burden of the Seal, now so much heavier than it was for Goddesses past…"

At one time there had been three additional Seals which served to lighten the Goddess' load. However, the Empire had destroyed them, making it so the Goddess had to carry the weight of the world on her own. The cruelness of the act upset Eris deeply, and had been the reason she'd decided to start training in the case she might have to take on this role.

“Say, how about we walk through the garden? The weather is nice out today.”

(The garden? Oh… that’s right. Today is…)

“That sounds lovely.”

Closing her prayer book, Eris rose.

Nine years since the world was pulled back from the edge of destruction. The Key System which had required the sacrifice of so many was dismantled, and the Knights of Seal were formed anew. Even the Goddess’ Castle had been rebuilt and was full of people. The trees in the inner garden, which had been just saplings when they were planted, now extended high above Eris’ head. The carefully tended to flower bed bloomed with a variety of flowers for each season, and was surrounded by fluttering butterflies. So beautiful was the scenery that no one would believed that there had been two who had lost their lives here, vanishing in a haze of flame…

“Eris, would you like to rest?”

For her aching body, the journey to the garden was an arduous one. Perhaps noticing her shortness of breath, Seere inquired of Eris, concerned.

“Yes… for a bit.”

“I’ll call someone to bring you a chair.”

“That’s all right.”

Smiling, Eris shook her head before settling down on the ground beneath a tree. The afternoon sun filtering through the leaves was warm and pleasant.

“This reminds me of my days with the Knights…”

“Come to think of it, you and Nowe were always training out in the garden.”

“Yes. We’d train until we were out of breath, then fall flat on our backs until we were rested. Then we’d go straight back to sparring.”

The dazzling sunlight, the sounds of the leaves rustling in the wind, the smell of the grass… while the place she was in and the person she was with differed, these things alone had not changed.

“It’s been nine years… since the Red Dragon died in this garden.”

While a proud member of the dragon race, the Red Dragon had entered into a pact with a human and then saw fit to sacrifice herself for mankind. Normally the role would have fallen to Eris, but she was but a newborn at the time. The strain of the Seal would have killed her. So it was that the former Hierarch, Verdelet, accepted the Red Dragon’s offer and performed the sealing ceremony on her.

Exactly how Goddesses were selected and how the Seal was transferred to them was shrouded in much mystery. There had been women who had no choice in the matter but also those who had elected themselves by choice. The last human Goddess, Furiae, had lost her life to the Empire. If not for that, she may have lived long enough for Eris to reach a suitable age to inherit the duty. If she had, then perhaps Verelet would have refused the Dragon's offer, and the tragedy created by having an inhuman Goddess might have been avoided. Surely the man had not been fool enough not to consider the risks… And so Eris had determined to live as long as she could to make sure the next Goddess would be an adult and not a child. Although since the Goddess selection process was so largely incomprehensible, she was not sure how much her resolve would pan out…

"It was also nine years after the Red Dragon became the Goddess that you first joined the Knights."

Seere said. Now that he mentioned it, that was true. Eris had parted with her parents, abandoned her status as a noble and left her home all at the tender age of nine.

"I remember passing by you in the hall that day."

"Oh?" Eris didn't recall. She didn't remember anything about that day except for her last look at her mother's face and the long corridor she had been led down which she feared might never end.

"You didn't notice me. You were too busy glaring at the back of the knight who was escorting you, biting your lip."

"How rude of me…"

"Not at all. I'd heard of your circumstances from Verdelet, so I understood what you were going through. I was struck by how mature you seemed for nine years old. When I made my pact with Golem, I didn't understand a thing."

Eris had heard that Seere had entered a pact at only six years of age, following the death of his mother. "Well, there's a world of difference between six and nine…"

"But my sister Manah had always been more mature than me, and we're twins."

When Eris heard the name Manah, a dull pain shot through her breast.

"Ah, yes, your… sister. Is she well?"

Eris had to struggle to keep her voice even. Luckily Seere did not notice this.

"She is! After all that happened, she left on a journey… but it seems she settled down about three years ago."

Eris' heart skipped a beat. She wasn't sure she wanted to hear the rest.

"She's running an orphanage now, taking care of little children."

“What…?”

“She writes me letters from time to time.”

Seere mentioned that she was living in a city in a different country.

“Does she ever plan on coming back…?”

“I’ve asked her that, but she says she couldn’t, since the children would get lonely without her.”

Seere chuckled, remembering something.

“All Manah writes about in her letters are her children! This one said this, this one did that… this child worries me, this child needs so much attention… and so on. It’s as if she’s their real mother! I never imagined Manah could be so nurturing.”

Eris had also heard that Manah had been abused by her mother, in stark contrast to Seere who had been bathed in her love. She probably saw herself in those children with no parents to love them, and wished to provide them with the same love she’d longed for herself as a babe. Eris had felt similarly when looking after Nowe. Although they were both so young, she took care of him in the way she’d wished her mother was around to do so for her. Seeing Nowe happy made her feel happy as well.

“At first I wondered whether letting her leave on a journey was wise… but now I’m glad, since she seems so happy.”

“That’s… good to hear.”

If Manah was in a distant land, yet to return… that meant she had not been with Nowe. Of course, he could visit her himself, but Eris had heard tell that Nowe was so busy since becoming the new leader of the Knights of Seal that he had no time to himself. And he had lost the set of wings that could have quickly flown him there…

(Look at me. Hearing the two of them are apart has made me feel such relief.)

“Eris, may I ask you something personal?” Said Seere.

“W-why yes. What is it?” Eris stammered.

For a moment she thought he might have been able to tell what she had been thinking. But no… it was his sister who had the knack for reading people, she remembered with a bitter smile. Eris remembered Seere saying she had developed that skill as a direct result of her mother’s neglect.

“Why won’t you meet with Nowe? You haven’t seen him once in these past nine years, even though you’re practically family.”

“Family…? Yes… he thought of me as… family…”

From the day she had met him, Nowe had been precious to her. It was thanks to him that she had recovered her forgotten smile. If he was by her side, she felt she could take on any challenge. Suffice it to say that her feelings toward him extended far beyond the familial… but to him, she was but a sister.

"I must obey the commandment that dictates that the Goddess of the Seal not be in contact with anyone from the outside world… not even her family."

Nowe occasionally sent Eris letters describing what was going on in his life and the world at large. His childish hand-writing hadn't changed a bit, which made her happy. She had read those dozen or so letters so many times, running her hands over the pages, that she could probably recite them from memory, if prompted.

However, she had not once replied to any of them. Of course, she had Seere thank Nowe for writing them. But that was all.

"It is best that I not interact with anyone more than the commandment permits." She answered to form, but in her heart she felt the pangs of her conscience.

"You know…" Seere began a little hesitantly. "Eris, that commandment is not as strict as you seem to think."

"It's not…?"

"It's more of a general guideline. While not allowed to associate with too many people, a Goddess' family would never actually be turned away if they came to see her, and if she really wished it, she would be allowed to venture outdoors, albeit with heavy surveillance."

"…"

"I bet you just thought to yourself that a rule that isn't kept to is as good as meaningless, didn't you? Honestly, you're so serious…"

Eris thought Seere was about to laugh, but he didn't. The smile on his face was a dark one. An adult expression that did not suit his cherubic face.

"Letting you see your family, or go outside… the Hierarchs would classify these things as special exceptions to reward you for your hard work."

"Special exceptions? But Lord Hierarch, you just said…"

Eris began, but she closed her mouth as understanding dawned on her.

It is said that all Goddesses are doomed to live short lives. That is how heavy the burden of the Seal is. On top of that, there is the despair of the knowledge that the pain will not let up until the exact moment of one's death. It was little wonder that so many Goddesses in the past had chosen suicide as a means of escape. The reason they were so strictly monitored, then, was to make sure they didn't try anything, Eris thought. And the reason they were kept from seeing anyone was to make sure they didn't try to run away with a lover or friend…

However, if nothing else, humans are adept at living. If they have even the merest glimmer of hope, they can keep on going. That was the real meaning behind those ‘rewards’. Even the smallest of things would seem like godsends to one living the stark lifestyle of a Goddess.

“The rewards bear the message that if you want more, you must continue to endure.”

In truth these rewards just served to better keep the Goddesses under control.

“They are some of the ways the Hierarchs have manipulated the Goddesses into staying in line. A dirty method.”

“But a smart one, too.”

She did not know who had first thought of it, but he understood the human psyche well. What wretched, selfish creatures humans were in the end… myself included, thought Eris.

“They only worked on human Goddesses, though. A dragon cannot be cajoled in the same way.”

“Is that why the former Hierarch did what he did?”

Verdelet had strengthened the seal on the Red Dragon by creating five Keys which served to completely rob her of her freedom and which required the sacrifice of many lives.

“That was the only way he could think of to ensure the Seal’s protection. But he was badly mistaken…”

The Red Dragon lost her sanity and the world fell yet again into peril. Again, tragedy had been wrought by human selfishness…

“Lord Hierarch, was it all right for you to tell me all that? You can no longer use those methods to persuade me, now.”

“I couldn’t have in any case, thanks to your devotion to the rules.”

Seere was right. But he did not know the real reason behind Eris’ strict adherence to them.

“Do you see now, then? That’s the truth behind that commandment. You don’t have to force yourself not to see Nowe.”

“No… even knowing the truth, still I cannot see him.”

Seere’s expression was that of confusion.

“It is due to my knowledge of the last moments between the Red Dragon and her pact partner.”

Eris had not been there to witness them herself, but Nowe had described them to her as they rode atop Legna to the Promised Land.

“I understand that one of the reasons the Red Dragon went mad was because she lost the ability to see or communicate with her beloved.”

Ironically, it was Seere's sister Manah who had destroyed the Keys sealing the Red Dragon's five senses along with Nowe who had sympathized with her cause. However, having already plunged into the depths of madness, the Red Dragon thought only of burning the world she cursed so into ashes.

Each of her screams pierced Nowe's heart, as he was capable of understanding the words of dragons. He said he would never forget her sorrowful voice as she called over and over again for her other half, the man named Caim…

"Unable to even comprehend that the person she most wanted to see was right beside her, by the time she regained her sanity she was at death's door…"

The reunion between the two, one they had endured eighteen years of suffering for, ended in mere seconds. That was all the time the Red Dragon had left before the light left her eyes.

"Now I know her anguish, for it is my own. It makes me shudder to think that, since she was not human, she had to endure even worse than I…"

Unable to see or hear, or even feel her own limbs… she had been jailed in a prison cruel beyond imagining. The only sensation she had was that of the intense pain of the Seal. And all because the humans had felt anxiety over not being able to manipulate her, because they had not trusted her… just for that, they cast the Red Dragon into a living hell.

"When I think of her pain… of her not being able to be with the man she loved… there is no way I could allow myself to meet with Nowe."

(No, that's just me prettying it up. In truth I am little different from those Hierarchs. I am selfish, unfair… and weak.)

"Eris. Verdelet was the one who created the Key System, and I was the one who let it continue. The people responsible for Angelus' suffering are he and I. Why must you suffer?"

"Because I wished for the Red Dragon to stay the Goddess forever. If she had, I could lead the ordinary life of a human women. That was all that mattered to me. I thought not once of her pain. That is my sin."

Perhaps it was divine punishment that the woman named Manah stole Nowe away.

"Did you think you could have him? You, who's never been allowed anything?"

Eris had felt Manah's red eyes saying these things to her each time she looked within them. They had enraged her, stirred up her hatred… to the point she was ready to kill her.

(Ah… in the end, I'm still jealous. Jealous of Manah who took Nowe's heart. Even after becoming the Goddess, my heart is no purer than before…)

"Even if Nowe came to see you… would you still refuse to meet with him?"

"If Nowe came to see me…?"

“He told me to keep it a secret, but in truth Nowe has come to this castle every year on the same day. The anniversary of the day you became the Goddess.”

Eris had believed that if they did not meet, Nowe would come to forget about her. That he would stop writing her letters and settle down with Manah. She had been mistaken. Manah had left for another land, and not only was he still sending her letters, Nowe came here every year…

“Today is that day. The day the Red Dragon died and you became the Goddess.”

How could she forget? It had been nine years since the ceremony ended and Eris had parted from Nowe.

“Don’t be sad, Nowe. I’m merely returning to the duty that was originally mine.”

She had told him, but she was putting on a strong front. It was taking all she had to keep from crying, and she knew if she saw Nowe’s face she would, so she kept her eyes lowered. Afterwards she would regret not taking one good last look at him.

“If you’re willing… you could meet with him today.”

Nowe… she longed to see him. Eris knew she had not much longer to live. The day they would be eternally parted was fast approaching. She knew this. She knew this, and yet…

“No! No, Lord Hierarch, I cannot!”

“Eris?”

Even she was surprised by the emotion in her voice.

“I… I swore an oath. That I would not die until the day I could meet with Nowe again.”

She swore that oath despite… no, because… she thought they would never see each other again. It was because of it that she had been able to keep resisting, to keep desperately trying to live, if only a day longer.

“Until the day we meet again, I will live. That thought gave me enormous strength. It’s not an exaggeration to say that it has kept me alive. Far more than the weight of my duty to keep the world safe…”

Before she had become the Goddess, she thought she could sustain herself on her sense of duty alone. But she couldn’t. It just wasn’t enough.

“If the oath were to be fulfilled… if I met with him now… then surely my will shall break. And then I would have no choice but to let death take me. Even though that’s not proper of me… as the… Goddess…”

She felt the tears rolling down her face. No matter how she reprimanded herself, there was no end to them.

“Eris, don’t cry. I’m sorry… truly sorry…”

Seere brushed her cheeks with his little hands.

“I did a cruel thing, not understanding how you felt…”

His words were those of an adult, though the fingers wiping away her tears were a child’s.

“No… now I know that Nowe has never truly forgotten me. I will always be grateful to you for telling me that.”

Eris felt certain Nowe was the same as ever. Surely his eyes were just as honest and gentle… and maddeningly pure. She knew if she saw them, she’d end up saying this: To not worry about her and go be happy with Manah. Then she would regret having done so from the bottom of her heart. She would wonder why she had added to her already considerable suffering. She was terrified of weaving these words she did not truly mean, and so had avoided answering his letters. Her adherence to the commandment was a mere excuse. An escape from Nowe and the truth in her heart. But things couldn’t go on this way. Her time was almost at an end.

“Lord Hierarch, please tell Nowe this: I will meet him here in three years time.”

In three years she would be approaching the end of her life, if she was not dead already. Seere, too, must have understood this.

“Three years…?”

“Three.”

(I’m a mean one, aren’t I? Making Nowe wait even longer than he already had. But…)

“If I carry out my duties as the Goddess for over a decade, then surely even the Red Dragon can forgive me.”

And by then Nowe will have surely have awakened to his true feelings, to his desire to be with Manah.

Next year was too soon. Neither Nowe or Manah could yet forgive themselves for exposing all the world to danger in the name of their shallow justice. That was why they chose to separate. She could only guess Manah’s feelings, but she Nowe’s better than he did. Both him becoming the new head of the Knights and sacrificing every moment in service to it, and Manah leaving to care for orphans in another land… both were acts of repentance. But in three years time, things might change within them. After having lived more than a decade as sinners, they may allow themselves to take each other’s hands. They may think of a different way to repent. So Eris believed.

“On this day, three years from now. That will be our day of promise.”

Even if, by the time that day came, Eris was no longer among the living. No… perhaps she hoped she would not be, to keep from saying the words she dearly wished not to. To not have to use her own lips to tell Nowe to forget her and go find happiness with someone else…

"I should return to my room now."

Eris stood up slowly. Her body ached as badly as ever, but she was full of a peculiar calmness.

"I'll leave you here, Lord Hierarch. Please return to Nowe. I'm sure he's not far?"

He was likely close enough that, should Eris have agreed to see him, he'd have appeared before her in just a few seconds. She was certain Seere would have arranged it that way.

"Will you be all right going back on your own?"

"Of course."

Watching Seere dash off like the child he appeared to be, Eris turned around. It occurred to her that this may very well be the last time she walked through this garden on her own two feet. Wanting to burn the view into her mind, she paused. Looking around she was witness to a flood of color and light. Flowers blooming bright red and yellow, the vivid green of the trees, the deep brown of the soil. The singing birds, fluttering butterflies, even the insects crawling in the earth… the garden was teeming with life.

"It's so beautiful…"

This is the world. The world that you revived, Nowe. And now, the world that I protect. This light belongs to you and I alone. As long as this world goes on existing, then you and I will always be linked.

"Nowe… this is the proof that I existed."

And I will live. As long as I can.

So thought Eris as she walked through the garden of light.

PART III

DRAKENGARD 3

*Note: The following novellas take place before the events of Drakengard 3, but contain certain story elements that could be considered spoilers for the game's narrative (Read ***"The Gone-Away"*** and ***"Mirror Mirror"*** at your own risk).

A Rain to End and a Flower to Begin

(Zero's Novella)

Where did this flower come from?

Rainy days are never good, I thought, as I stared through the rain pounding down relentlessly around me. I felt the rise of an unexpected laugh. As if sunny days were any better.

"What is it?" a voice next to me asked, weakly. It was so frail that the rain threatened to wash it away.

"What is what?" I replied, and wished I hadn't. People who answered questions with questions disgusted me. I used to make sure they never answered anyone again. Every time.

"I can hear you crying."

"You're mistaken. That was a laugh."

I couldn't blame her. How could she have read my expression? They had taken her sight; pried open both her lids and thrust needles into each eye. And that was not the only torture she had endured. Repeated burns from a branding iron had reduced her palms and the soles of her feet to rotted, reeking flesh, and the joints of all four limbs had been ruined to the point where she couldn't even turn in her sleep.

I won't stop here and lament that people are willing to do something so brutal to a girl of so few years. I practically expect it from landed lords, or else why would she and her friends have tried to start a revolt in the first place? The damned fools.

And it was foolish. They were found before they could even pick up their weapons, let alone revolt. Sold out by one of their own. That's what you get for trusting other people. There is no such thing as a person incapable of betrayal.

That said, the stubborn ones like her who held out were given the same mangling as the ones who confessed immediately, and all were laid out here, onto the cobblestones of the square. Being clever didn't earn anyone a better outcome. Their lord may not have treated them fairly, but he did treat them equally.

If any one thing could be called unequal, it was that five fine souls who tried to strike down an oppressive lord were chained up here next to a common murderer like me. There was no making sense of that one. I wasn't tortured the way they were. I had no grand scheme or friends to give up. Since I had nothing to confess, no one shattered my bones or ripped my fingernails off. All I got was a vicious lashing.

The pain, which had felt like flames leaping across my back, was gone now. There was no sensation left. The cold rain must have been nipping at my back, but I felt no chill. Knowing it meant my death was near made it no less strange. "What a waste of life." There was no stopping the laughter now. I couldn't remember a single good day, rain or shine. My life had been hell from as far back as I could remember, and undoubtedly from the first moment I came into the world.

My earliest memory is of my mother shouting, and the only other thing I remember from those days is being slapped around. I doubt I was fed well, either. After all, I learned to swipe a meal before I even learned to speak. If she'd been feeding me properly, I wouldn't have been forced to steal.

My mother shouldn't be singled out as a bad person. Only a handful of kids were lucky enough to have warm food and a bed. Unless you were born into some fancy noble household, you could kiss any hope of a life like that goodbye. You wondered why the hell you were born, grew up knowing you were a thorn in the world's side, turned into a shitty adult, and then unwittingly wound up with a bun in the oven. That was it for most women. My mother did nothing more than raise me the best way she knew.

Once I reached an acceptable age, my mother sold me without a second thought—for a pittance, when I thought back on it later. As was the way, I was sold to a brothel, where women who looked a lot like my mother attended to men with tight purse strings.

It wasn't all older women; there were girls there my age. I became fast friends with one. She called me "Rose," which was how I learned the color of my eyes. "Haven't you ever looked in a mirror? she asked in surprise when I told her. Of course not. I couldn't have cared less what I looked like.

I decided she should be called "Indigo." As little as I cared about my own face, I realized her eyes were a pretty color. Rose and Indigo: they were names that belonged only to us.

One day, Indigo suggested we steal some money and run away. I nodded, believing that together, the two of us could do anything. I never stopped to think about where we would run or what we would do after.

The plan went off brilliantly; we took as much money as we could carry, and fled out of town and across the bridge to the far side of the river. There was a man waiting there with a horse. I had seen him before; he was a patron who hung all over Indigo. "If we make it across the river, everything will work out," she had said, and now things were starting to click.

I thought for certain they would take me with them; how utterly wrong I was. They had planned to kill me all along. Indigo could only carry so much money by herself; that was why she'd approached me. The only reason. "No hard feelings, Rose." And then she grinned. It was the same smile as always, but then I knew. Underneath it had been a girl who was figuring out how to kill me. Took me long enough to see it.

If the pursuers hadn't come right then, my life would have been over. The other two galloped off in a hurry, and I alone was caught.

I never resented Indigo for it. Rather, I was rankled by my own witlessness. Why did I trust another person? Of course it was my fault, for being fooled. If things had played out differently, Indigo and that man would be the ones lying dead by the river, and I'd have been the one to get away. Next time, I thought, I'll do better.

My chance came several months later. I took the gold and got away with ease; I might have even put Indigo to shame. To keep pursuers off my back, I slaughtered everyone: the procurers, their underlings, the women. It wasn't hard. All I had to do was wait until they were sound asleep, then end them one by one.

I killed the procurers first; next, the men they'd hired to do the dirty work. Thanks to the poison I'd thrown into the casks, they were half dead already. Even with my meager strength, it wasn't hard to finish off men who had already ceased moving. Once the men were taken care of, work went fast. Women never smell blood. Torrents of the stuff were flowing right by their side, but not one opened her eyes or let out a scream before expiring.

I took as much money as I could carry and left town before dawn. Of course, no pursuers came, but worse news did: bandits. They captured me handily and gleefully relieved me of every coin I had. And thought they spared my life, I again felt the sting of failure.

I waited for my chance and escaped before they could sell me back into whoring. This time, thievery was out of the question. I knew I would be better off not trying to carry off their money.

Any coin I had would just be stolen. If I needed something, I didn't have to buy it; I could take it. No one could rob from me if I had nothing to steal.

I did have one thing they wanted, though: myself. The bandits were ready to sell me, just as my mother had sold me; as a woman, I would always be someone's spoil. But that was beyond my control; I could not discard my womanhood or leave it behind. I suppose I could have made Indigo's choice and found a man to protect me. But people lie; people betray. I didn't want their protection. I would protect myself.

Wait. But I did live with a man. Just one, just once. I ran into one of that sleazy brothel's patrons. It was some place far away, in some unfamiliar town. He remembered my face; I remembered his. I have to kill him, was my first thought. The procurers and the women were dead—all of the except for me. He wasn't so witless that he couldn't piece together what that meant. But, for whatever reason, I didn't do it. Instead, we found a corner of that unfamiliar town and started a life.

He wasn't witless, but neither could you call him honest; he was a thief with a talent for picking locks. Together, we raked in the coin and passed the days with amusement. As a life, it wasn't bad, and thoughts of killing him slipped away.

The life didn't last long, though. I got sick. A scourge was going around. Slowly but inexorably it eroded the body and killed you. Not only that, it was contagious. Fearing for his life, the man left me. I don't blame him, and if it had ended there I would have let him go. But he was going to sell me out; a bounty had been placed on the "brigand" who had broken into the brothel.

What a fool. I had only just caught the scourge and my symptoms were still mild. I struggled to get up in the morning, got chills in the evening, broke into fits of severe coughing... But that was it. Nothing that would interfere with me taking a life.

Thus, I had no trouble reversing our fates when he came in my sleep to tie me up. The scourge had turned me into a light sleeper—and either way, I had a certain sensitivity to lethal intent. Before I could think, I had opened his gullet, and he died with the confusion still written on his face.

It was only then that I realized I'd never really let him into my life. Despite sleeping and eating with him, telling myself I was over killing him, it wasn't true. Otherwise, I wouldn't have constantly kept a blade hidden within reach.

And so, I was alone again. I journeyed aimlessly, filching food and clothes as I went. As I mentioned, the scourge was taking its time with me, so it was well within my ability to travel and plunder and kill. I murdered the owners of my spoils on the spot, women or elderly included.

Again and again I would hear, "Take the food and the money. Just spare my life. Please." It's strange; everyone makes the same face when death is close. Did I look at Indigo the same way? No, I never begged.

"Suppose I do spare you. You're certain to hold this against me. You'll come for me one day."

"I would never—"

"Never let it go, right? I just butchered your mother right in front of you." And unlike mine, this one must have been a good mother, considering she had thrust herself in harm's way to protect her daughters. "Anyway, I'd apologize for this, but that would only serve to make myself feel better, and I'm not that deluded." With that, I killed the two trembling sisters while they still clung to each other. No doubt they hated me in those last moments, but they would never come after me with a knife.

There were some who didn't beg. One was a girl a few years my junior. Rage flared in her eyes as she lay into me. "Why!?" Why would you do this?"

"Maybe because I'm hungry."

"How dare you mock me!"

"No one's mocking anyone. I'm starving, and don't have the coin for food."

"And you think that justifies this!?" Her father's and brother's bodies lay there in front of her. A bit further away was a woman who appeared to have been their cook. I always dealt with potential threats first, which meant I got stuck with children and elderly last. "You could have simply taken our gold and left!"

"Yeah. You know, you're right. I used to think it was about keeping people from seeking vengeance, but I'm starting wonder if that's really it. Why do I do it?" But I had already strangled her before I could finish expressing my reservations. Her eyes were still wide when she took her last breath, still red with anger. "I wish I could tell you."

I felt her gaze on my back as I took a loaf from the table. I hadn't been lying when I said I was starving. The whole reason I had picked this house was because the family looked rich. And since it was suppertime, food would be waiting to filly my belly. I had a good reason. But again, I wondered aloud: "Why?" I took food from the plates with my bare hands and washed it down with a swig from the decanter. My compliments to the chef.

"Why do I do it? Shouldn't I know after this many?" I posed the question to the girl's limp body on the floor. I hadn't been keeping count; I didn't think it mattered. All I knew was that I had killed a lot of people. And yet I couldn't answer one simple question: Why do I do it?

"Maybe I kill to find out why." The girl's dead eyes continued to glare at me. I guess it wasn't a good enough answer.

I continued to live like that for some time. Before I knew it, I had stopped searching for reasons or answers; I robbed people and killed them as easily as I drew breath.

The thing is, I entered public awareness around the time my kills reached triple digits. I had done my best to finish off everyone in the homes I breached and leave no evidence, but then again, I hadn't gone out of my way to be secretive, so I suppose I got made at some point.

My days became numbered once word got out about the young woman behind the merciless killings of young and old. Descriptions of my appearance circulated and merchants spread word during their

travels. Soon every town in every land was searching for the "witch with eyes of rose." The bounty for my capture would pay for a life at ease, and proper rewards were promised for even a decent lead.

And so I was caught. They surrounded me while the scourge was doing its work on me. By then, the symptoms had started taking their toll, and I was unable to resist, let alone escape. Soldiers in grand armor made an even grander fuss of binding me hand and foot.

My gamble—that the scourge would kill me first—had been wrong, and I was dragged off to the bastille. They condemned to the lash; I would be struck once for each life I took. Personally, I think I toughed it our rather well; they whipped me until my skin was in tatters and my flesh split, but I survived. Then again, if they had gotten my kill count right, I would have died for certain. Their tally came up woefully short, and so my punishment ended well before it could be called capital.

Of course, that didn't mean I was forgiven. They chained me up to die in the square, along with the five rebels. Directly next to me was the young girl I mentioned earlier. While the others no longer uttered so much as a groan, she continued her one assertion: "What we did was right." But her voice was growing ever fainter. When the lot was dragged out here, she was in the most miserable state. I could tell that she was keeping herself alive through sheer power of will alone.

I took advantage of her lack of sight and stared her up and down without reservation. Here was more or less my complete opposite: a girl whose sense of justice was hopelessly unswayable. The fact that we stood in this place shoulder to shoulder struck me as strange beyond words. Eventually, she inquired as to who I was. It was my fault for coughing; the scourge's distinctive and disagreeable bark gave me away as not being one of her friends. "Who are you? What's your name?"

"I don't have a name," I answered. "I don't have anything. No coin, no house, no family or friends or lover. Nothing at all. I give 'nothing' new depths. All I have is this life which is about to blink out along with everything else. I wound up with zero. Jack shit."

Because I did shit away my life. I lived empty day after empty day without purpose. It was so stupid in retrospect that I found myself laughing uncontrollably.

"Don't cry," the voice said.

"I told you...I'm laughing."

I was struggling so hard to breathe that it must have come out as spasms. Like any of those next breaths could have been my last.

"Really?"

"Yes."

I heard what might have been a sigh. The rain had finally eased into a drizzle. A moment later, her body convulsed for a few fleeting seconds, and then she stopped moving entirely.

"Hey..."

No answer.

"So, I guess it'll be me." It had been decided the last to survive would be burned alive with the bodies of the other five. One of the group bit her own tongue off when she heard. Another was dead by the time the bunch was dragged out to the square. Another died before the rain came, and a fourth during the downpour, leaving me and the girl.

Good luck burning me in this weather. Maybe they would try burying me alive with them instead. At least we can all take solace in the fact she wasn't the last to go. It wouldn't have been right if the one girl who had shown compassion for others right to the end had to die the worst.

But what was right? Who was right?

I could hear the girl's voice again: What we did was right. And it was. Only the world could be called wrong—this world full of lords who shit on their people, this world with smug murderers like me. This world where those who stand up on behalf of the weak are crushed like so many worms.

This is madness. It doesn't make any sense. Ire filled me all at once.

No. It had always been there and I just hadn't noticed. I hated the world. I had damned it in my mind since before I could remember. I could feel the tremor of a scream in my throat. Glurp. Something warm dribbled from my mouth. It was blood, not a scream. This fucking world is trying to kill me. Fuck that. Fuck the world! Fuck you all! YOU fucking die! Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!

Then, all of a sudden, I noticed a flower. A rose-colored flower was blossoming right before my eyes, between me and the girl's corpse. Where did it come from? I don't remember seeing a flower there. It swayed beneath the rain's blows. The flower must have been new to me, and yet I recognized it. Maybe because its color is so like my eyes. Or maybe I'm already dead, and this is one of those flowers that's supposed to grow in Paradise.

No. Heaven won't have anything to do with me. I'm dying, and this is a hallucination. But that's all right. I still want to see it up close. I want to touch it. No one has ever given me a flower, and I've never longed for one. But this flower, I love.

I felt something constricting my sight. I wasn't able to shut my eyes, so I kept gazing at the flower. It was so lovely... My life may have been wasted, but this was not such a terrible final thing to behold.

As its widening petals filled my field of vision, I greeted the flower with a quiet smile.

My Favorite Things

(Five's Novella)

This world is made up of things that I want, and things that I *really* want.

...As one of my big sisters, Two, might put it.

What Two had actually said was, "This world is made up of things that I like, and things that I really like."

That got me thinking about my version of what this world could be made up of. I don't have as big a heart as Two does; I could never claim that the world is full of things that I like. Honestly, there are too many things that I dislike. Nasty foods, ugly clothes, boring people...

But just because I don't like it doesn't mean I don't want it. I mean, what if that food isn't tasty because it isn't being cooked right? One time, Two wrestled with the stomach of a sandworm to make me an unbelievably delectable soup. I think she said she had to cure it in salt first before

drying it in the sun, and then spent days stirring the pot as it stewed. Now, that was far more complicated a process than I would be willing to go to, but it proves that it's worth wanting.

You can make ugly clothes presentable with enough accessories. And boring people can turn out to be quite useful as servants. You have to make something your own to determine its true worth. Wouldn't you agree?

So I don't think there is anything in the world that I don't want. But there are things that I want just a little bit. And then there are things that I want *badly*.

What I want the most, of course, are pretty accessories, clothes, and shoes. I prefer gold over silver in my accessories. And lots of sparkling jewels! Like a walnut-sized sapphire brooch studded with tiny aquamarine and diamond pieces. Or an emerald-encrusted gold work necklace.

I like lace in the clothes that I wear. I almost passed out one time while trying on a robe made entirely of lace! I love lace in detachable collars, shawls, even handkerchiefs.

Apparently, it takes a lot of time and effort to make lace. Four told me that prices hike up with even just a little bit of lace around the edges.

"You could feed a poor family for days with the money you would spend on just one of these frilly things. Do you still want to keep playing dress-up like a little girl?"

Four always speaks the truth, like an older sister should. So I replied:

"You're right, Four. I don't need this dress anymore."

I was getting tired of that holey rag anyway.

My favorite right now is the one with lots of ribbons. Layered bow ties made of fine thin silk, all over the sleeves and torso! Isn't it adorable? I think I should make a decorative belt out of ribbon and squeeze it tight around my waist to highlight my magnificent bosom. Wouldn't that be a feast for the eyes?

I bet this dress covered in ribbons is expensive, too. How many days could this feed a poor family, I wonder.

But it's not as though these poor people would be able to stuff themselves if I stopped dressing up. Those issues are unrelated. Besides, I didn't pay for these dresses out of my pocket. They just *became* mine after we offed our former lord.

It was that lord that extorted money from people and then squandered it. It wasn't me.

Anyway, what should I wear today? The one with the ribbons? I love this dress with the damask folded in, too. The gold and silver threads really complement the color of my hair. Or maybe I should wear this one with sable fur around the hem and cuffs—

"Mmff... Five? You up already?"

Whose voice do I hear from directly behind me? My disciple's, of course. So cute. I love him so much. Poor thing, he sounds groggy.

"You can go back to sleep, Dito."

Young'uns need lots of sleep. Especially Dito because he stays up late every night.

"Not with the fuss you're making."

"Oh. So sorry."

"No worries."

I love the way he yawns and stretches loudly. He is so beautiful that I can barely contain myself. His face is like a doll.

And by doll, I don't mean like the toy soldiers that Three makes. I mean normal dolls. Cute girl dolls.

But Dito is so much cuter. Skin as white as snow, eyes twinkling like the brightest stars. His soft curls feel so airy through my fingers I could rub my hands over his head forever. I like Dito the most. Dito is my favorite toy.

"You're playing with your dresses again? So early in the morning? You're such a dork, Five."

I even like the way he mouths off. Maybe it's the element of surprise in hearing such venom being spouted from such an angelic face. I firmly believe that the key to every relationship between a man and a woman is unpredictability. I mean, wouldn't you rather your lover take on a completely different persona in bed?

But I digress.

"I have to get up as early as I can. A day goes by so fast," I say.

"Well, of course you'd run out of time when you're changing clothes four times a day. Why can't you just wear the same clothes until nighttime?"

"Perish the thought! With so many dresses, how could I wear but one a day?"

It's not as though circumstances don't allow me to change because I'm traveling, or because there is nothing else to wear. To keep the same clothes on when I have so many is simply unthinkable!

"Tell me, Dito: which dress do you think I should wear?"

I take the one with the ribbons, the one with the gold and silver threads, and the one with the fur edges, and place all three in front of him. But all he does is yawn.

"I don't care. They're your damned clothes."

The disinterest in his voice sounds almost convincing. It doesn't match his cherubic face. What could be eating at him? Oh, I get it!

"You just don't like dresses because they're a hassle to take off of me."

"No, that's not exactly—"

"You've been trying to tell me that you'd rather I wore nothing at all!"

"Not really, I just—"

"But I don't mind doing it fully clothed, you know."

"Now, wait a minute!"

"I'll just get on top. Or should I stand while you take me from behind?"

"Will you stop, please!?"

"Are you being coy with me? Or is that a backwards invitation?"

Maybe he really is hesitating. Dito is my disciple, after all. A disciple is enslaved by his Intoner. He is forbidden to go against my word. A disciple must perpetually serve the Intoner, day and night.

"There is no need to be shy, you know."

"This one! You wanted me to pick out a dress for you, right? Right!?"

Oh, Dito. His face is all red. Is he blushing? So adorable! Makes me want to squeeze him tight and pin him down on the floor.

"I like this one! The shiny number!"

"Forget the dress, Dito. Let's—"

"Oh, wait, wait! There's one you haven't tried yet. Remember, with the embroidery? The blue, flowery one?"

He's right. There was a rather unique blue one with flowers stitched in. And I hadn't tried it on yet.

"Stay here, Five! I'll go get the dress!"

He slips out of my arms like a cat. But why does have to leap off the bed and dash like one? I'm not the type of master that gets upset just because you're slow to fetch a dress.

I thought I heard a heavy sigh from the wardrobe, but that couldn't have been Dito. Like he is an impeccable disciple to me, I am an impeccable Intoner to Dito.

Dito walks back in, dutifully carrying the blue dress. I open it up in front of the mirror. A form-fitting glossy blue garment with finely embroidered flowers. So exotic. So bold!

Yes, I like this, too! With every step, my legs show from the deep cuts up the sides. Definitely not to Four's liking. She would probably call it tasteless.

"This is pretty. But that doesn't mean the other ones aren't. What's a girl to do?"

I already had the one with the ribbons, the one with the damask, and the one with the fur to choose from. And now this flowery blue dress, too? There is no way I can choose just one!

"I wish I had three or four bodies. Then I could wear them all at once!"

"Three or four bodies? Of YOU? Are you serious?"

"Of course I am."

"...That would be a nightmare."

Dito looks as though the world is coming to an end. I wonder what could have crossed his mind.

"I think it's a fabulous idea. Let's ask One if she knows any spells that can create three bodies of me."

Big sister One is always holed up in the vault underneath the church reading difficult books. I wouldn't be surprised at all if she knew a spell or two of the sort.

"If I had three bodies, I wouldn't have to ponder over which dress to wear. Why, I could even eat three times more."

"You already eat three times what you should."

"What? That's not true."

Sure, I have a hearty appetite. I don't like feeling hungry. Hunger makes me feel lonely. That's why I eat before I start feeling hungry.

But that doesn't mean I eat three times as much as a normal person. Dito has that mischievous grin. Mmm, I love that look on him.

"Whenever the cooks ask you if you want meat or fish, you always answer both."

"But, Dito, that would only be two times as much, not three."

Besides, if they ask me to choose one of two dishes, it has to mean they're ready either way. They wouldn't ask me that way if they weren't. Which leads me to think, if they're both available, why not have both?

"How about if they offered broiled meat, stewed meat, or steamed meat? You would say all of them."

"Well, yes, if that's the way they phrased the question."

"What if they asked you if you wanted broiled fish, steamed fish or fried fish?"

"All of them, I guess. And now you're making me hungry. I wonder if breakfast is ready yet."

"See? Your appetite is *more* than triple the norm, Five."

I really don't think my appetite is to blame. It's the pure fact that there is so much deliciousness in existence. As much as a gourmet as I am, I couldn't possibly ask for something that doesn't even exist.

But if I *do* know it exists, and it's out of my reach, I would chase it to the edges of the world.

Oh, I do love going on trips in search of good eats. It's far more thrilling than having to go hunt down some evil man, or to vanquish a monster or some other nasty thing. I tell Dito:

"I can't wait for springtime. Then we can go on one of our gourmet trips again."

"You mean the nasty beasty feasts?"

"But in Two's hands, any beast can turn into a scrumptious meal."

"Aha! Then you don't deny them being beasts?"

"Oh, there's no doubt they're beasts. But only Two can turn gobin brains into a silky pâté. Sting lizard in aspic, pickled six-eyed catfish... You can't these things just anywhere."

"They are rare, um, delicacies, I suppose."

"Exactly."

"It's not every day you have to risk your life for a meal. I certainly wish I never have to."

Oh, my. Dito. That cocky look. And the way those shoulders go up when you shrug. Now you've done it. Bad, bad boy.

"Um... Five?"

And *that* look. The uncomfortable look. It just makes me want to make him even more uncomfortable.

"You're not having any...wicked thoughts, are you, now?"

"Wicked? Heavens, no."

The way he looks up at me with those frightened pupils. He's almost like a little bunny. Mmm, and there's another fine delicacy. Rabbit meat. Stewed for hours until it's so tender it melts in your mouth. Serve it with a sweet sauce made of fruit.

"D-Didn't you say you were hungry? H-How about some b-breakfast?"

"Yes, I'll have some right now."

"Wait. Please wait, Five—"

"No. I can't wait. Don't you know me by now?"

He looked like he had more to say, but what he says doesn't really matter. Not when I'm *on*. I can't hold it back anymore. My sweet, sweet disciple. My one and only hunny-bunny. Where should I start eating?

"Why does this have to happen so early in the morning?"

"It's because of those sleepy eyes of yours, Dito."

"What you're saying doesn't match up with what you're doing."

"But don't you enjoy snoozing in my bosom?"

Even his moans are lovely. Though one could mistake them for sighs. They can't be sighs.

For all the effort and creativity I put into this, I see no reason to tolerate complaints. I try a great many things not just for my own pleasure, but for the pleasure of my partners, too.

I believe one should put in an honest effort before blaming others for an unsatisfactory experience. You can read books or talk to people. You name it, I've done it.

You can even try different partners. Luckily for me, I have plenty of partners to choose from. Men and women, even multiple partners in one night. It could very well be that there's nothing wrong with you, but that it's just a matter of chemistry.

But chemistry can be tricky. It is awfully hard to find someone who can truly impress. But I am not about to give up. Because this can't be as good as it gets. It has to be so much better.

And when I learn something really good, I'm going to share it with Dito. Because he is my precious disciple.

"No, wait... Not yet...!"

Oops. I guess I got a bit distracted. I'm sorry, Dito. Don't sigh like that. It's okay, really.

"Sweet Dito. There's no need to make such a face."

We can just have another go at it! As many times as we want. Right?

"Five, you have the appetite of three people, but the libido of thirty."

"Why, thank you for the wonderful compliment."

"...It wasn't a compliment."

"Such a good little man. You deserve a reward. Where do you want it?"

"Sounds more like I'm about to be punished than rewarded."

"Oh! So is that what you're into?"

I had no idea. To each his own, as they say. That explains why he looks so bored sometimes. Why didn't he tell me sooner? I don't mind putting in the effort and creativity, but I also think it is wiser to avoid wasting time on detours.

With the world so full of things that I want, I don't have a moment to spare. So many beautiful clothes to try on! So much delicious foods to sample! I don't want to even waste time sleeping.

"Why do you have to be so greedy?" asks Dito.

Greedy? Me?

I don't think that's entirely accurate. I think my desire for things is a reflection of the need to feel how powerful I am.

In those moments where I finally wrap my hands around something I have really wanted, the euphoria is instant and orgasmic. Feelings like superiority and omnipotence rush out in waves from the deepest parts of my being. *Nothing* feels better than having the power to obtain what I desire.

If I didn't have that power, I don't know if I would want anything. How sad would it be to want something but not be able to get it? Why, I imagine life would be a miserable waste to pursue something that is impossible to obtain.

But one does wonder... What if there is such a thing? I can't even imagine what it might be, but I supposed there could be something that I could never, ever have.

With my hand on my heart, I begin to think...maybe there is. Something I have not noticed until now. I don't even know whether I want it or not, but it's something devoid of excess or grandeur.

What could it be?

It can't be food. And it's probably not jewelry or clothing. If it were any of those things, I could easily get my hands on it.

Is it a person? But I have plenty of servants and handmaids at my beck and call. I even have soldiers who would risk their lives for me. Men? No shortage there, either. I know of no man who could resist my advances. Unless he were my own father or something. Father... Daddy...?

"Five? Are you all right?"

"Huh...?"

Gone. I could almost make it out...but it's gone.

"This is new. I've never seen you so lost in thought while in bed."

"Well, isn't that rude? I'll have you know I am perfectly capable of having deep thoughts."

"Did I make you mad?"

"Not at all."

In fact, maybe he did me a favor by chasing away *that* particular silhouette.

There is no way I could remember my father. He died not long after I was born. To try to recall something that I have no way of knowing would be an utter waste of time.

So no more losing myself in deep thoughts. Who cares about what I can't get? I just want to keep thinking about all the things that I love. The sapphire brooch, and the emerald and gold work necklace. The dress with the ribbons, and the dress with the flowers. The robe and shawl and the detachable collar with lace.

"Now, where were we?"

And my sweet, sweet disciple.

"What? Again!?"

"I'm only kidding."

I really am hungry now. Let's have breakfast. How about some soft-boiled eggs on toasted bread, with smoked fish and pickled vegetables? And the dried fruits preserved in honey. Oh, but I must decide on what to wear before that. Speaking of which, I think there was a dress with the cuffs as long as drapes. And where did the red woolen one go?

These are the things that make me happy! I just need to keep thinking about the things that I want, and things that I really want. And not think about anything else.

How could any body be happier?

Family Portrait

(Four's Novella)

"Five! I know it was you. Don't just leave your clothes lying on the floor!"

I've already yelled at her to clean it up. So what if the house is abandoned and no one lives here? It isn't ours to do with as we please. We're here to rest from our travels and take shelter—that's *it*. And when we leave, we need to put things back the way we found them. We're not slobs.

But Five has been shedding her clothes and spilling her food like she owns the place. She ought to try cleaning up after herself. Well, I suppose it's to be expected from the youngest in any family.

I start to fold her dress and catch myself grimacing. There's a big tear in the seam under the sleeve. Oh, of course. She probably forgot all about this dress the second she found something else to change into. "What am I going to do with her?"

I let out a big sigh. Not only do I clean up after Five, I wind up mending her clothes, too. But she's all thumbs, anyway; if I made her do the needlework, we'd just wind up with more rags. Either that, or she'd prick her finger or something and make a big scene. Best to avoid the trouble and handle this myself. One open seam won't take more than a few minutes.

I spread out the dress to check it for other tears, and now I've noticed there's hair all over the floor. "Three," I groan. "Not you, too."

Three has made a bad habit of this: sitting down any old place and then getting her hair all over everything when she cuts it. It's not my older sister's fault her hair grows faster than other people's, but honestly, I swear she does this for kicks. I mean, if it's that much of a hassle, she could just chop it off at shoulder length. But Three cuts the ends; she'll just grab a clump of hair and *snick, snick* away at it with her scissors. I think she enjoys it. You could almost call it a hobby—a really weird one, in my opinion.

In fact, she's a little weird in general. All right, a lot weird. Exceedingly weird. Actually, I'm still mincing words. She's a certifiable loon.

As I think this, I hear the *snick, snick* getting closer. Here she comes. "Three, would you stop getting your hair all—" But *over the place* is dead on arrival. Three has been cutting her hair as she walks. With each *snick,*more of her silky hair flutters toward the floor.

"Need something?" she says. The fallen hair is getting on everything. Her brazenesss has knocked the words right out of me. If it were Five, I would already be yelling, "Stop making a mess!"

"Three, maybe you shouldn't cut your hair while you walk."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Because... Because scissors are sharp, right? If your hand slips, you could hurt yourself."

"I'll be fine." Three cuts off another lock of hair as if to say: *See? Not dangerous.* I feel my shoulders slump. What a waste of time. I should have known who I was dealing with right from the start.

"All right, you'll be fine. But could you please pick up the hair you've gotten all over everything? This isn't our house." I shudder to think what the next people to come in will think if they find mounds of hair all over the floor. I know I'd be creeped out. "Here you go." I hold out a broom realizing as I do that it's another waste of time.

"I'm tired," says Three. Sure enough, she flops down on her butt, keels over, and is asleep before I can blink. She's not *pretending* to be asleep; she's actually doing it. It's incredible, in a way.

I can't sleep if you so much as switch out my pillow, but Three—she can deal with a different mattress, or no mattress at all, or even just a patch of dirt. If she can get horizontal, she can sleep. You could raise the roof right next to her and she wouldn't care. No matter how dirty her clothes get, she doesn't mind. As delicate as she looks, Three is a tough one to faze.

It's a shame. Three has the prettiest face of all of us. But despite being a beautiful young woman, she's impudent and slovenly and just plain odd. I doubt anyone would believe it if you told them.

What a shame about her hair too. It's straight and lustrous and feels just like silk, and here she is clumsily hacking it to pieces. If I had hair like that, I'd cut it nice and even, or at least do it up properly. And if I had Three's face, wouldn't catch me rolling around on the floor. I would want to be *presentable*. I can't fathom how someone could be born this pretty and wreck it all with bad hair and worse behavior. Three is frittering away nature's gifts. She doesn't even seem the slightest bit interested in using her head, as smart as she is.

Maybe that's what separates the loons from the non-loons. I bet loons never give any thought to falling in love or leading ordinary, happy lives.

Once I've put a coat on Three so she doesn't catch a cold, I clean up the hair on the floor and stitch up Five's dress. I've really gotten the short end of the stick, haven't I?

Three may be strange beyond reproach, but I've got to do something about Five. We're hurting her in the long run by letting her act spoiled and take people for granted all the time just because she's the youngest. Today, I need to finally give her a good talking-to.

And how unfair is that? I'm sure I must have been the youngest child up until Five was born, but I have no memory of it. As far back as I can remember, Five has been there and I've been on big sister duty as second youngest. Grown-ups tell me I need to "tough it out" because I'm older, as if *that* makes any sense. When have I ever begged to have my way or burdened people the way Five does?

You know, I'm probably not cut out to be a youngest child anyway. My conscience and common sense would get in the way if I tried to pull one of Five's selfish tricks. The first thing to jump to mind would be how much I'm putting other people out. And more than anything—

"Four? Did you want to see me?"

This. I can't be this smooth a customer. Never in a million years will I have the brass to wait until right *after*someone finishes mending my clothes to come crawling in.

"You know you're not supposed to leave your clothes lying around. How many times do I have to tell you? And look what you did to the seam!"

"Oh, that's not me."

"I don't want to hear it. I stitched it up for you this time, but next time you're on your own."

"It really wasn't me! Honest." The nerve of her. Who but Five could ever be a big enough slouch to try and pin the blame on someone else?

"Oh, Four. Sorry!" says a tomboyish voice. "That one's my fault." My older sister Two is scratching herself when she turns up. She can get a little rough around the edges, but what baffles me is that it comes across as lovable. If I acted like that, people would probably mistake me for an actual boy,

not some lovable tomboy. And if Five tried it, they'd think she popped a screw. Why is Two the only one who gets to be able to pull it off?

Well, anyway.

"But, Two, this is Five's dress." It doesn't have her name written on it, but I'm pretty good at remembering whose clothes are whose. When you have to pick up after everyone and mend their clothes, you get pretty good at telling people's belongings apart. So the dress is clearly Five's. The thing is, Two would never lie to me...

"Yeah. It *was* Five's dress." Aha. Mystery solved. So that's what happened. I knew Two wouldn't lie to me. "Was" means she got the dress as a hand-me-down. It makes sense. Total sense. No further explanation needed. I get it. Please don't go there, Five!

But she does.

"The dress was squeezing me so hard I just couldn't wear it anymore." Five sticks out her chest as she explains, and I feel a tinge of anger. A girl her age shouldn't be this developed, let alone flaunt it. It's sick. She ought to be ashamed of herself. I mean, what is it they say? You're born with either tits or wits?

"Five said she was done with it, so I took it off her hands." Two explains with a big smile, completely unfazed by our little sister's pig show. Would it hurt Two to reprimand Five just once? It's a big sister's duty, if you ask me. "But when I tried it on, I flexed a little too hard and...*rrrip.*"

"The seam burst."

"Bingo! That's right, Four." Two's muscles are overpowered, so she's always breaking things or punching holes in the wall. But then she says, "Oh no!" and turns white as a sheet. It's kind of ironic that one of us with the best intentions does the most damage. She'd be a real catch otherwise.

"Can you *believe* I ruined a dress someone just gave me? I went to find a needle and thread to see if I could fix it up."

"Here you are, Two." I hold out the dress, which is all stitched up now. Unlike Five, Two can take care of herself, but she's a little clumsy. She's decent enough with her fingers, but a little disorganized, you might say. So I tend to get thinks taken care of first. It doesn't upset me though, since Two isn't trying to unload her chores on people.

"Whoa! Hang on. You're kidding. You did this for me? This is amazing! How'd you do it so fast? It's perfect!" Two will never flatter you or dole out empty compliments. Her praise comes from the heart. Everything about her does; she's cheerful, eager, kind, compassionate.

But my sister is so honest sometimes that I worry about her. Those same qualities can be flipped around and used against you. People like that are easy to trick and to take advantage of, right?

Which is bad enough in itself, but Two is likeable and attractive. It wouldn't surprise if unsavory sorts came up to her with less than good intentions. She projects a sort of helplessness and flightiness which makes her look like an easy mark. And, in fact, she probably *is* an easy mark.

But knowing her, even if she did get burned, she'd probably bounce right back and convince herself it was a one-time mistake. I'm sure she'd say "This time I'll meet Mr. Right," and keep letting men use her and then toss her aside. Another troubling thought.

I mean, someone as attractive as her shouldn't be throwing away her life to chase after a bunch of worthless jerks, right? With her good looks? Talk about going downhill. What a tragedy. It worries me sick just imagining. That's right. I'm only thinking of her!

"Four, you're the *best!* Let me go try it on." I hear Two squealing in delight as she does, and next she's saying, "Yay! It's a perfect fit!" as she turns in circles. It almost feels like *I'm* the big sister.

"Well? What do you think? Huh?" Once Five and I manage a nod, Two's face lights up in a big grin and she wheels around. "I've got to show this to One!" she gasps, and flies out of the room without even shutting the door. She can be such a child. Well, she *is* a child. This whole journey, we've been going around trouncing villains and monsters that have been tormenting innocent people. It's been easy to forget that we're all still kids. And Five doesn't help with all that flaunting and the filth she spouts.

"Oh, Four." The indecent creature is slinking up behind me right now. I've got a bad feeling about this. "Now did I lie to you or not?"

"No. I misjudged you."

"Why do you always have to treat me like the villain? You hurt my feelings," she says with absolutely no hurt in her voice. I can feel her pressing right up against my back.

"I was wrong," I manage.

"Is that it? Aren't you going to say you're sorry?"

"I'm sorry," I manage again.

"I can't *hear* you."

"I said, I'm *SORRY!*" Ugh. I'm not usually this easy to get to. She thinks she's so smart. Jerk. "could you get away from me now? You're crushing me."

Her and her oversized bazoom! It ticks me off!

"Mmm," she moans. "You don't like being crushed? Why? Because you can't do it with those pancakes?"

"WELL, EXCUSE ME AND MY PANCAKES! LIKE I'D EVER WANT TO BE LIKE YOU! GET AWAY FROM ME, IT'S HOT ENOUGH IN HERE! AND DON'T 'MMM' ME! YOU'RE TOO YOUNG TO BE ACTING LIKE SOME FILTHY WHORE. I BET THE FOOD YOU EAT GOES

RIGHT TO YOUR TITS AND YOU'VE GOT THE BRAINS OF A STUPID COW. YOU STUPID DUMBSHIT! DUMBSHIT, DUMBSHIT, DUMBSHIT!"

"Oh, Four! Stop! You're so scary."

"SHUT UP! BITCHCOW! GO EAT SOME BITCHGRASS!" Soon, I'm grabbing everything within reach and throwing it at her. But she writhes and moans and dodges it all, which only manages to piss me off even more.

I hate you so much! All of you! I despise you! I know I'll never be lovable like Two or beautiful like Three. I know that compared to Five I'm a pancake! I hate myself! I hate my face! My body! I'm not pretty or lovable and I have the most average face you can imagine. My arms and legs are gangly and I look like a twig that can never get my stupid hair to straighten out!

And these horrid nails! I hate them so much I just want to die. They keep growing and growing and get all curly and weird if I don't clip them, or else they crack or they get caught on everything. They're useless and I wish I could just rip them straight off. My arms are useless, my legs are useless, my face is useless—all of me is useless!

Maybe...I'm useless.

Me? Useless? No! I'm not the one who's useless!

YOU ARE, YOU WORTHLESS FOUL-MOUTHED SLUT! IF YOU THINK YOU AND THOSE FLOPPY SACKS OF MEAT ARE SPECIAL, THEN YOU'VE GOT ANOTHER GODDAMN THING COMING! A SHIT WOULD TURN ITS NOSE UP AT YOU, YOU'RE NOTHING, SO FUCK OFF!

*YOU TOO! YOU MUSCLE-BOUND LOVEY-DOVEY FREAK! AND YOU, YOU FUCKED-UP-WACK-JOB SCISSOR FIEND! YOUR BIG FAT BRAIN DOESN'T MEAN JACK SHIT! YOU AND YOUR STUPID PRETTY SKIN. IF IT'S SO PRETTY, WHY DON'T I RIP IT RIGHT OFF SO YOU CAN STARE AT IT? I'LL YANK IT RIGHT OVER YOUR BITCH SHOULDERS AND TEAR IT INTO TINY FUCKING PIECES SO YOU CAN WATCH ME **GRIND** IT INTO THE FLOOR!*

I'm laughing maniacally now. *I FEEL BETTER! I FEEL **MUCH** BETTER!*

When I come around, the room is in shambles. And yet there's Three, still sound asleep. The fact that she managed to stay dead to the world through that much commotion has to make her some kind of prodigy. A loon prodigy.

Five must have fled the scene a while ago. She's not very smart, but she is smooth.

"I am such an idiot." I know I have to get this cleaned up fast. Whoever makes the mess has to clean it up. Everyone knows that. But when I see my sisters not doing it, I start to feel pretty stupid being the only one playing by the rules.

I put back the chairs and table I had upended, pick up the decanter, and wipe the floor. Oh no, I can't believe it. Was I throwing dishes? Five hadn't bothered to clear her place, and even now there are bits of food stuck to the pieces.

I sigh. "Why me?" But while Five may not have cleaned the dishes up, I'm the one who threw them and broke them. This is on me. From now on, I'll have to keep my temper tantrums to a minimum. Even if I get mad, I need to hold it in. Because no matter what I say or do, I'm only hurting myself in the end.

When at last the cleaning is done, I take a seat in a chair. I sure am tired. Maybe not on Three's level—but really tired.

"Is anyone here?"

My head has been face down on the table, but I look up. My eldest sister has just come in. "One, what's wrong?"

"Oh, I'm glad you're here, Four. Can you help me?"

"Should I wake Three up?"

After just a glance at Three, who is still sleeping like a log on the floor, One shakes her head. "Leave her be. You'll more than do." *You'll more than do.* I hear the words again in my head. They make me happy. One appreciates me...

Of all my sisters, One is the brightest, and the most knowledgeable, and the most dependable. She is responsible and just. She might not be lovable like Two or beautiful like Three, but her every expression and gesture exudes wisdom. That's why she's my orle model. I can't do anything about my face, but I can always get wiser.

Also, One has pancakes like me. For now, anyway.

"One, what do you need help with?" I ask as I walk a few steps behind her.

"Fixing a cart. I got us one at a nearby farm."

"A cart? What for?"

"There's something we'll need to carry once we get where we're going next." As I look at her in profile like this, the resolve on her face is pronounced. This is the expression she makes before going into battle. And we won't be doing it for ourselves. It will be for someone else: people who are suffering. One isn't the sort to turn a blind eye to injustice.

But sometimes I feel sorry for her when I see her like this; she has so many responsibilities. And she's not even the oldest of us, really. She's only in this position because she got sort of...bumped up the ladder, you might say. The truth is, One is someone's little sister, too. Someone else is supposed to be eldest and shoulder all this responsibility and tell us what to do...

"Um... Listen. You know I'm here to do everything I can to help you, right? You don't have to make every problem your own."

One seems a little surprised at first, but then her eyes soften and she replies, "Thank you." Two is unreliable, Three is weird, Five is selfish. That means I've got to help One. As dependable as she is, she's trying to fill the shoes of someone else, and that can't be easy.

Don't worry, I'll be there for you. That's what little sisters do. Well, at least this little. Right, One?

"Huh?" When I wake up, One is gone. The cart we were supposed to fix and the vacant house we had borrowed are gone, too. I'm in the same bed I always sleep in. "Oh...it was just a dream."

Of course it was. After all, we're all grown up now, and our journey is over. I used to think we could still go back to those days, when the five of us traveled together, but too much has changed.

I find myself wishing I dreamed of an older memory. One from way far back, when we had Zero, who was stronger and more beautiful than any of us. Back when I loved her, and admired her, and tried to be just like her.

But then, I still love her. She's my sister. She's family. I still believe she'll go back to the way she was so we can all live together again. So we can all be happy again.

And maybe I won't mind if there's one or two less of us.

My Dolls are Nice Dolls

(Three's Novella)

Month X / Day X

Today, I made my first doll. Although I copied someone else's way of making it, it's my very own doll that I made. It turned out much better than I thought, so I was very pleased.

Month X / Day X

The Mr. Soldier doll I copied, is actually from a game called "chess". The Mr. Soldier I took from the lord's castle was the first doll I've ever owned. I've always liked dolls since I was little, but I've never had one of my own. After I got caught taking it outside the castle, One scolded me, but I couldn't let go of the doll. Because, it was my first. Even if I get scolded, I like dolls.

Month X / Day X

Today, I made my eighth doll. I am now done with the black Mr. Soldier dolls. I think I'll start making white Mr. Soldier dolls tomorrow.

Month X / Day X

I finished making the white Mr. Soldier dolls. Now, I'm finished with all the Mr. Soldiers, so I'll be making other dolls tomorrow. On the "Chess board" I saw, there were dolls on horses, but I don't think I'll make horses. It's because I like dolls that are in the shape of humans, rather than animals. There were also dolls of houses, but that's boring so I won't make those either. Besides, dolls made into houses aren't human-shaped, right? Houses can't move or talk. So, instead of horses and houses, I wonder what kind of dolls I should make? There are kings and queens. Maybe I should make a doll with strange clothes, such as the "bishop". But, what is a bishop? I think I'll look into it next time.

Month X / Day X

I looked up "bishop" and found out what it is. They are important people called "priests". They wear strange clothes and hats. In the book, it was written that "bishops" shave the top of their heads, and don't have any hair. I didn't know that, so I initially made the "bishop" doll have a normal head under its hat. I immediately trimmed the doll's hair to make it shorter. It was difficult making it into a nice round shape, as shown in the book; however, it is now a proper "bishop" doll.

Month X / Day X

I was reading about a living being that has an upper-half of a human's body, and the lower-half of a horse. I'd been wondering what I should do instead of a horse doll, so this is perfect, and I've decided to make it. I kept reading the book, hoping there might be something to replace the house doll, too.

Month X / Day X

In chess, the horse doll is known as the "knight". So that's it. I could've just made a human doll riding on a horse from the start. I recall seeing a chess doll riding on a horse at the lord's castle. Since there were more that weren't riding a horse, I thought that would be normal. Either way, since I already made it, it's fine. I also checked to see if the "house" doll could be something else, and it wasn't a house, but a castle (rook). Since it's not a human or a living thing, I was disappointed. After giving it some thought, I decided to make the castle doll into a monster I saw in a book. It was a giant monster. If I tie both arms behind, and twist the legs, it looks like a building, right? Just to make it look more like a building, I'll add stairs and ladders to it.

Month X / Day X

I finished making all 64 pieces of the chess dolls. After lining them up, I can see that I've gotten better. I'm happy. I wonder what kind of dolls I should make next.

Month X / Day X

Today, I made a doll from my own ideas, instead of copying one. Up until now, it was always troublesome gathering the material, but making it like this won't involve such troubles. Besides, it's much more wonderful and prettier than a chess doll. This time, it really is my very own doll. My cute, cute doll.

Month X / Day X

Today, I played with all the dolls I've made. In the picture book, there was a girl who played with dolls, so I decided to play with them too. The girl in the book played with her father doll, mother doll, grandmother doll, grandfather doll, and children dolls. But I don't really like my father and mother, so playing that way wasn't very fun. Besides, I don't have a grandfather or grandmother. Octa is a grandfather, but not mine. I'll think of a different way to play.

Month X / Day X

Today, I played "bad-guy hunting" with my dolls. I prepared a One doll, Two doll, Four doll and Five doll, and beat up the bad lord. They're dolls and don't have the power of songs, so I believe I was able to well replicate the part they all united their powers to fight. It was very fun, but the bad lord's doll broke. I must now make a new doll. It's fun to play, but I think I prefer making instead.

Month X / Day X

Today, I played "teatime" with my dolls. Playing "bad-guy hunting" broke my dolls, but drinking tea and speaking shouldn't break them. Having conversations with the dolls is very fun. The dolls pay close attention to my stories. The dolls never complain. They don't say things like, "What does that mean?" or "I don't know what you're saying". For being so well-behaved, I made them sweets. I also made tea. It's a very pretty purple-tea that looks like a jewel. I wanted to match the sweets, but I couldn't get them to be the same color, so they were green sweets. After feeding the dolls sweets and giving them tea to drink, their faces turned to a dirty color. I washed them but they would not return to their normal colors. To top it off, they got a strange smell, so I decided to throw them away. I must now make new dolls. I won't be playing "teatime" anymore.

Month X / Day X

I like dolls, but I also like scissors. From the cutting-sound it makes, to the feeling I get in my hands, I love everything about it. When I cut my hair, I have so much fun, I even forget to eat at times. When I tried cutting Octa's hair, it wasn't like mine, and it was very hard and rough. I tried cutting his moustache, but he ran away. Actually, I wanted to make him look like a "bishop". While I like scissors, I don't think Octa does. And they're so fun, too. Also, it doesn't seem as though Octa likes dolls that much, either.

Month X / Day X

Octa wears strange shoes. They have a funny shape. I wanted to make my dolls wear them, but Octa wouldn't let me borrow them. Even though he wears such shoes, he's actually very fast when he runs away. The time I tried to cut his moustache, he ran away with surprisingly fast speed. When I tried cutting other parts, he was even faster. Weirdo. I wonder why he doesn't want it? It's fun. I

really don't know. Now that I mention it, lately, Octa doesn't play with me much. That's because Octa doesn't like dolls. I want to play with dolls. I think Octa, who doesn't like dolls, should go play by himself.

Month X / Day X

Today, I spent a lot of time thinking about the meaning of "cuter". Personally, I think all the dolls are cute. They're all cute in their own ways. Maybe because of that, I didn't know the meaning of "cute" versus "cuter". Then, I decided I'd to put them in order, from simply "cute" to "cuter" and maybe I'd understand the difference. I gathered all the dolls I've made up until now, and arranged them in order of "cuteness". I was then able to note the difference. Firstly, ones with wider foreheads are cuter than the ones with narrow foreheads. Then, the ones with bigger heads are cuter than smaller heads. Instead of small and thin eyes, the ones with large and wide eyes are cuter. Smaller mouths and noses are also cuter. The ones with plump cheeks are cuter. The dolls with fat and short arms and legs are cuter, too. The ones with their stomachs sticking out are cuter than ones with flat stomachs. So that means, I'll make them with bigger heads, wider foreheads, big eyes, smaller mouths and noses, and plump cheeks. Yes, I have it! The way to make dolls cuter. I think I'll try it out first thing tomorrow.

Month X / Day X

Today, I worked on making the dolls "cuter". After trying, though, it was much more difficult than I had expected. First of all, it was difficult to make their heads larger. This is because the dolls' heads are hard. It's not like I can inflate them like a balloon. Making foreheads wider, and noses smaller, didn't go too well, either. This is because I can't carve them like wood, or mold and make them rounder like clay. After trying this and that, things didn't go too well, and I ruined one doll; however, I did finally stumble upon a good idea. Since it's hard to change the size of their heads, what if I were to change the size of their bodies instead? I thought I could change the length of their arms and legs. After trying it, I was able to do it. I thought it might be difficult to make their bellies poke out, but after looking at the pillow on my bed, I was strucky by another good idea. The more the insides of pillows and cushions are filled, the fluffier they become. All I have to do is fill the dolls' stomachs with more "fluff". Sure enough, after filling then with plenty of "fluff," they developed nice round stomachs. It was a great success.

Since I was able to make their stomachs nice and plump, I did the same to their arms and legs, too. They became cute and plump arms and legs. Their fingers would also look cuter if they were more plump, so filled them up with "fluff" as well, one by one, even though it was a little difficult. I even filled their palms. Then when I put on their previous heads, I was able to make them into dolls with large heads, with plump arms and legs. However, I'm still not very good at it, so their width and length didn't match, and they looked a awkward. If I make many like I did with the chess dolls, I think I'll become better. I thought I'd do my best tomorrow.

Month X / Day X

I became better at making plump dolls with big heads today. They no longer look awkward. While making them, I noticed that the "cuter dolls" have limbs and bellies that resemble those of a baby.

Babies also have large heads. They also have wide foreheads, and wide eyes, with small mouths and noses. That's it… making them "cuter" means making them look like babies. Yes, I understand now.

I'll try making their cheeks a little more squishy. That's how baby cheeks are, aren't they? Perhaps I'll fill them with something softer than "fluff," too. What should it be? I think I'll give it some more thought.

Month X / Day X

I spent the entire day looking for "cheek filling". Something very soft with a nice feel to it. The insides of a featherbed? How about the insides of a cushion? what about a plush? Or sweets? I tried cutting many things that are plump or fluffy, to check their insides.

When I cut the featherbed, many tiny feathers scattered across the room. I accidentally inhaled some, and couldn't stop sneezing. After cutting sweet and fluffy snacks, my scissors got sticky from the cream. After seeing me sneezing while licking off the sticky cream, Octa began to look, looking disturbed at the same time. After that, Octa washed my hair and changed my clothes that were covered in feathers, and I finally stopped sneezing. But I couldn't find something that could be used as a filling for cheeks. What are baby cheeks made of…?

Month X / Day X

I tried many different ways, but in the end, I decided to loosen the strings inside the cheeks of the dolls. This seemed like the best way to do it. I carefully loosened the white, red, and pink strings, and made them into soft, fine threads that filled the insides of their cheeks. I had to make them fluffy, and not jam-packed. They also couldn't be shriveled up, so I kept on feeling them with my fingers to test their softness.

Month X / Day X

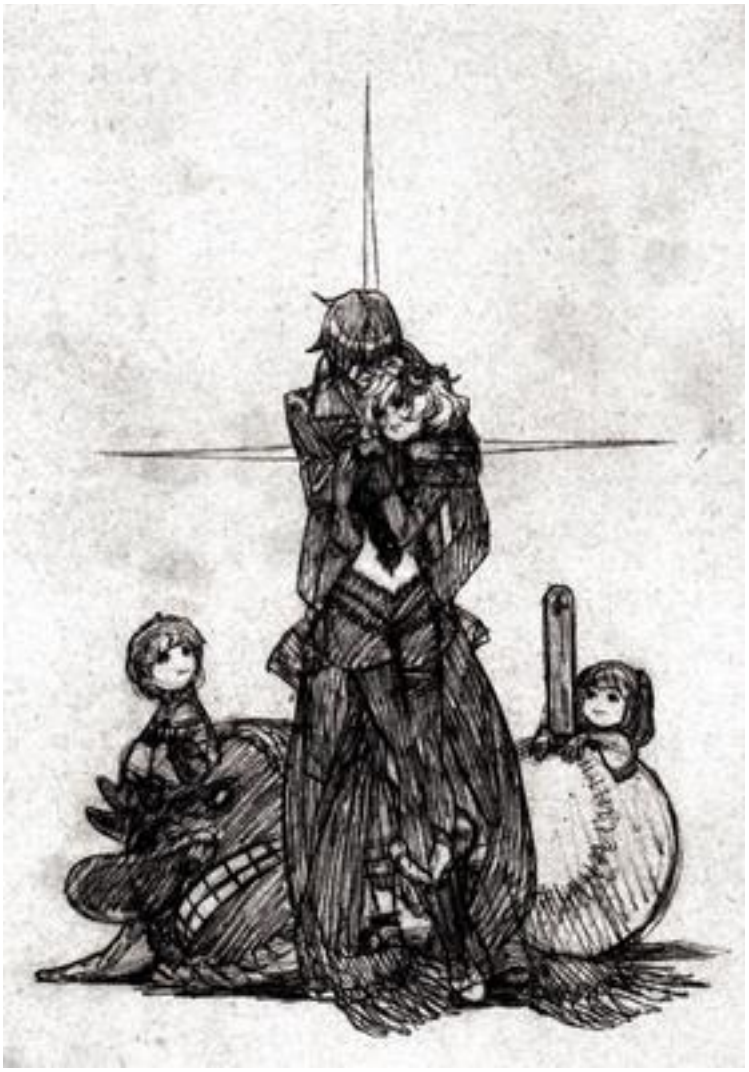
It took days and days, but I was finally able to make a "cuter doll" with baby-like cheeks. It has a plump stomach, with plump arms and legs. My cute, cute doll.

However, I want to make even cuter dolls. What kind of dolls are even cuter? What could their insides consist of? What kind of material should I use? What would make it even cuter? I think I'll give it some more thought.

I think Octa wants to play, but I'm too busy. After making a cuter doll, I think I'll just want to make an even cuter doll after that. I wonder what kind of doll I should make next. I want something that is much cuter, so I can have many more dolls to play with. Tee hee hee… hehehe.

Today’s Meal

(Two’s Novella)



"Is there anything I can help you with, Lady Two?"

"Aw, Cent, you called me ‘Lady Two.’ You promised me that you’d—"

I was about to say, “call me Two when we’re alone,” but I stopped myself short.

It can’t be helped; Cent must be proper and refer to me as “Lady Two” when others are around. But he leaves out the “Lady” part when we’re all alone. We made that promise a while ago. That’s why Cent’s been calling me "Two" lately. As long as we're alone.

But he said “Lady” just now. That means...

I stop pouring water into the cooking pot and about-face! Then I rush toward the entrance to the kitchen. I hear some footsteps running. And not just one set, but multiple. I catch a glance of the ones running away and see that they're the chefs.

"I knew it."

So Cent referred to me as "Lady Two" since he knew everyone was peeking.

"Oooh! I told you I'd be fine by myself! Why can't you trust me?"

A large hand gently touches my cheek as I pout. Then I notice Cent's gorgeous face in front of mine.

"You can't blame them, now can you? After all, you are a precious Intoner to everyone in this land."

Ah! My cheeks light on fire at the touch of his hand. What should I do? I can't stop blushing. And he's not giving me time to think.

"But obviously, no one in this world cares for you as deeply as I."

I can't take it! Mv heart's about to burst!

What should I do? What should I do? What should I do!?

"Two?"

How can Cent be so handsome? He's not only handsome, but he's kind, too. And he tells us all these funny stories. But when we're alone... Yeee!

"Two? Are you feeling all right, my dear? It might be best to lie down in the bedroom."

The bedroom? D-Don't say another word! Yeee! Yeee! Yeee!

"Why dont we take a break from cooking for the moment..."

That reminds me of something important.

"No! I have to cook today!"

Calm down, calm down! I have to cook for Cent today! It'll be a dinner for us the two of us! I've been preparing for this for two whole weeks! Breathe, breathe...

"Then, may I lend a hand?"

"Absolutely not! I won't allow it! You can't look, either! Where's the fun if you know what I'm making?"

Oooh, but...

"...But it'd be nice if you could stick around, just to keep me company."

"As you wish, my lady."

Ack! He's giving me that cute smile of his! That's so unfair! How am I supposed to concentrate!? ...Breathe. I need to breathe... Calm down. Okay, I'm okay. I take a couple more breaths and then tap my cheeks.

"All right! I'm in the groove! Cent, take a seat over there."

I point to the chair in the corner, trying not to look at Cent's face as much as possible. Can you blame me? My heart would start pounding again if I looked at his face! All right, then. Back to cooking.

"Rrragh!"

I place the water-filled pot on the counter. Then I cast my spell.

The magical glyph glows and ignites a fire that engulfs the pot. I don't know how, but this counter seems to have been used for some sort of ceremony. I suppose that shouldn't be a surprise. This room wasn't a kitchen when we first got here; this whole place was actually a shrine—not the most accommodating of places.

But my sister One gave me orders to "rule over the Land of Sands and protect the shrine," so I decided to live in it! Living in the shrine was the most convenient option, after all. I mean, I didn't have to worry about building a new house! Though I did have to redecorate the place a bit. To spruce it up, you know?

For instance, there was this room with lots of old books and scrolls, so I had the books taken out and made it into a bedroom. There was tons of dust, but I cleaned the place thoroughly and scrubbed the floor spotless, so it's really nice now.

I put up some wallpaper with small flowers on it. There was a kilt with a similar pattern, so I turned that into the bedcover. Then I placed a table with carved legs next to the bed for a nightstand and placed a vase with flowers on it. I always wanted a cute room, you know.

The only thing missing are some adorable curtains, but this shrine's underground, so there aren't any windows... Still, it's a comfortable place to live in. It's cool inside when it's hot outside, and when it's cold outside, it's nice and warm here. I bet whoever built this shrine had the extreme weather in mind when designing the place. Although it is annoying to need candles on all the time to get any light down here, even during the day.

Another perk of living underground is that food doesn't spoil easily. I made this ceremony room into a kitchen and I didn't even have to make a storage area for food! But I still need to make sure that our supplies are kept away from heat.

Oh, and I wanted to eat with all the soldiers and neighbors, so I made the really laaarge area in the middle into a dining hall by placing a bunch of chairs and tables there. Food always tastes better when you're eating with a large group. right?

But I thought it'd be nice to have dinner alone with Cent, even if it was just once in a while. So, that's why I decided to cook today. I gave all the chef and servants the day off. Everyone needs some time off to relax.

"Here we go. The veggies have all been prepped. so I need to get the meat ready."

"Two, is that tro—"

"Yes, it's troll. I skinned it and cut it up into chunks, I'm going to stew it with some herbs. Oh, I made sure to drain the blood so there's nothing to worry about. Rrraght!"

I use a sword to cleave the joint. Troll bones are super tough, so normal knives won't do. They chip too easily. Luckily, only the bones are hard. The meat is actually nice and soft. That's why you can use troll meat for various dishes and not just stews. You can fry it, or you can cut it into thin slices and broil it, or even batter and deep fry it. Pickling the meat and then storing it in a barrel will let it hold for six months, too! It's such a great way to preserve food!

The only problem is that trolls are pretty heavy, so it's difficult to work with the meat unless you're strong. I think that's why more people don't know that troll meat is so useful. Of course, I'm sure we'd see more of it if troll pelts had any kind of value...but they smell so awful that no one wants them.

"A whole troll might be too much for the two of us... Grrragh!"

I rub some salt and wine into the meat once I cut it into chunks. Removing the tendons is quite a chore, but it's also a lot of fun. I love cooking.

"It's wonderful to have a place to cook whenever I feel like it."

We hardly stopped anywhere with a proper kitchen when we were traveling. It was mostly cooking meat or fish over an open fire, and that's it.

We'd occasionally come across an empty house with a kitchen. And by occasionally, I mean rarely. But it always brought a smile to my face when we did and I always insisted that the cook take the day off so that I could prepare a meal for everyone.

"By the way, who's the best cook amongst the Intoners?"

"That would definitely be One."

"And not you?"

I think about Cent's question for a second. I definitely enjoy cooking the most, but One's the best cook. There's no doubt about it. That being said...

"No, One's the best. But if you asked her, I'm sure she'd tell you that anyone could do what she does."

"What do you mean by that?"

“Well, she thinks that the basics of cooking are so easy that even a child could do it. She just can’t understand how someone could mess up such a simple task.”

“I see. So Lady One believes that cooking comes naturally. However, cooking is not comprised of just the basics.”

“She said you can apply the basics to anything if you give it a little thought.”

The problem is that “just a little thought” for One is thinking up a storm for most other people.

“What about Lady Three? She’s skilled in handling blades, isn't she?”

“I guess you could call them blades, but Three’s specialty is scissors.”

There are scissors specifically for cooking, but Three’s scissors aren't really for for that. I think there was a time where she used them to cut open a fish, and the fish ended up all mangled. But then One used a rock to grind the fish. She then rolled out the fish meat and broiled it. It was so delicious! She then reminded us that it’s simply *impossible* to mess up cooking.

“On top of that, Three doesn't seem to like tampering with things much. She’s the type that likes to enjoy the natural flavor of a dish. Like enjoying fresh ingredients the way they are.

"...It sounds like she’s just lazy."

“Hmmm... I guess you could say that."

We were always given vegetables whole if Three was in charge of cooking. I think Three just never was interested in cooking.

“Oh, but Four did say that you shouldn't overcook vegetables. If you do, then you’d lose a lot of nutrients.”

I think she said that veggies found above ground should be left uncooked, while veggies taken from the ground *should* be. That’s why it’s better to ear fruits and leafy greens raw while it’s better to boil or cook onions and potatoes. At least, according to Four.

“She also said that it’s best to have a meat-to-vegetable ratio of one-to-two. And that it’s better to eat fruits in the mornings and to eat fish at least twice a week.”

I think she also said that using sugar and salt too much isn’t good, either. The food was always bland whenever Four was in charge of cooking. I guess it can’t be helped. I mean, when Four cooked, Five would pour salt on without even tasting the food, saying, “This is just the right amount for your dishes, my dear sister.”

“But you know, it’s because of her understanding of food that Four’s cooking makes you feel really healthy It’s almost medicinal.”

“It sounds like her food is just overly bland.”

"Uhhh... I guess you could say that.”

But her cooking is perfect if you're sick. You could eat whatever she made even if you had an upset stomach. I remember a time when we stayed with a farmer and Four cooked dinner to show our thanks. The grandma was so happy. She said that there were so many things she couldn't eat because of her old age. But she ate everything that Four made that night.

"How is Lady Five's cooKing?"

Five's cooking is the complete opposite of Four's. Whereas Four's cooking is perfect for sick people, only the fittest can handle Five's cooking. It's like you need courage to eat it!"

Five loves really spicy meat and oily foods. She'd use a ton of sugar or salt while cooking, too. Four would always complain that there weren't enough greens in Five's cooking or that it was too rich. Five also loves exotic foods. She'd toss in plenty of herbs or mushrooms that she found into her dishes. Even grotesque-looking ingredients were fair game. I'm more open to various foods now because of Five... Who would have thought insects could be so tasty if they're prepared right?

The thing is, Five doesn't care at all if something's unhealthy or dangerous. I remember a time when she made a stew with fish and mushrooms. We all got horribly sick after eating that stew. According to One, Five used a poisonous fish whole. One also said that colorful mushrooms shouldn't be eaten. Considering Five put both of those into her stew, it's no wonder we all got sick.

But that kind of incident never deterred Five. The next time she was in charge of dinner, she tried to use some red mushrooms with white spots in a salad and Four gave her a thorough scolding. I'm not sure if Five has thick skin, but she sure is consistent. She'll bring some exotic ingredients whenever she visits and always asks, "Is this edible, Two?" And every time, I try to come up with creative recipes to utilize them fully. It's more fun than you might think! It's almost like trying to figure out how to make tough meat tender, or how to get rid of the foul odors meat can give off. I'll try anything—hitting the food, drying it out in the sun, or brining it in wine or oil. Oh, the feeling I get when I can make something I thought was completely inedible into something delicious! Nothing beats that!

Five seems to understand how I feel. She started off bringing me unusual fish and nuts, but then she started bringing extremely difficult ingredients to use, like carnivorous plants and fish with poisonous spines. I guess the greater the challenge, the greater the reward, right? Just the other day, she went out and caught a sandworm in the desert, and it wasn't a tiny one either. She really surprised me with that one. It was gargantuan! I mean, how can you not give it your all after seeing something like that and the effort she put into catching it? I did my best, and a couple of days later, I made a wonderful sandworm soup! I was so happy when the soup was done. It feels wonderful when your efforts are rewarded, doesn't it?

"Five's the type that constantly aims high. You could say she's adventurous—courageous even—when it comes to food. No, that's not right. Maybe an evangelist? A guru? Uh...what's the word?"

"I believe you mean her tastes are *bizarre*."

"Ummm... Well, I guess you could say that."

But when living in the land of Sands, having a bizarre taste is a vital survival skill. It's not unusual to go days without a drop of rain here. This country is more Likely to see a year of famine than one with plenty of rain. If you can catch a monster and use it for food, then you won't die of starvation, right? We can all dine together no matter what happens, and it's all thanks to Five.

"Anyway, the troll's ready. I just need to simmer it for a while. And now..."

I open the barrel I had sitting in the corner of the kitchen after I toss the troll meat chunks into the stew. The smell of liquor stings my nose. I've been preparing this for two whole weeks.

"Okay, it's looking good."

Now to put it onto the counter.

"Rragh! Ha! Ha!"

Smack! Smack! I strike the meat repeatedly with a club.

"Two...'what is that?"

"Oh, this? It's minotaur thigh. I think it's called tendon or something. It's from the minotaurs we slew a while ago. I pickled the remaining meat since we didn't finish it all, remember?"

I washed the meat thoroughly, soused it. and then let it sit in wine two weeks ago. Minotaur meat is delicious, but it's so tough that it needs a good tenderizing first.

"I'm pounding the meat to tenderize it so that it's nice and soft. Then I'm going to cut it up and stir-fry it with some veggies. Huh? Wait a minute... I've been telling you what I'm making haven't I? I guess asking you not to look was kind of pointless..."

"No, my lady. It is not pointless. It's obvious that such explanations are beyond the comprehension of disciple of my caliber."

"Wow! That's incredible! You're so amazing Cent!"

What should I do? My heart won't stop racing! Why is Cent so handsome and charming? I love him so much that I could die! Wait, no... I can't be with him if I die. But I don't know what to do! My heart can't take this anymore! It's beating so fast!

"Dab, what am I thinking about? Be still, my beating heart! I need to calm down! Focus...focus! Hiya! Hiya! Hiya!"

I smack the minotaur tendon over and over.

"Hiya! Hiya! Hiya!"

Phew, this is hard work... And all this smacking has actually calmed me down. I am kind of out of breath, though... And... Oh dear. The tendon looks like minced meat. And there's a crack in the counter...

“Oops...I guess I overdid it. Oh well. Hehehe.”

I collect myself and attempt to start cutting up the veggies when I hear some voices from the door.

"Two!"

"Let's play!"

"Play with us, please!"

"Huh? What's the matter?"

I see their cute little faces all lined up by the door. Oh, these precious little children.

They’re orphans. The Land of Sands is impoverished and the old ruler was a really lousy guy, so a lot of people, adults and children, died under his rule. These kids survived, but they were left all alone. That's why I decided to take them in an live together. Even if their moms and dads aren't here, they won't be lonely if we're all together.

I was never lonely growing up because I had One, Three, Four, and Five by my side. There were times when I'd remember Mom and Dad and want tocry, but I never did. And that's because I had my sisters.

But why are the children even here? "I thought you were all leaving for a slumber party."

I had everyone at the shrine take the day off, so I asked them to take care of the kids for the day.

"Well..."

"We came back."

"We wanna be with you!"

"Come on, let's play!"

Oh, these adorable kids are holding hands lined up by the entry way. They're my...family. Then I feel a hand gently touch my shoulder.

"Don't worry about me, Two."

I turn around to see Cent's smiling face. Ah, Cent completely understands. My feelings, my desires, what's important to me. Everything. It's not because I'm an Intoner and he's my disciple, right? I'm sure that I'd have fallen in love with Cent and he'd have fallen in love with me no matter what our roles were... Right?

"Let's have a dinner for two some other time."

"Yeah. Thank you, Cent."

I love you, Cent. I love you more than anyone in this whole world. I'm so glad we met.

"All right, wait a sec, okay? I'm making a yummy meal and we can all eat together when I'm done!"

The children squeal in joy. I go back to cooking for my beloved Cent and my precious family.

This Repulsive World

(Dito's Novella)

I hear the sound of the waves. It annoys me, but this being a seaside country, there's no getting away from it, save for sleep. Another morning... I think wearily to myself. I wish the sun had never risen. Then I wouldn't have to go through another exasperating day... but no. If the sun had never rose, it would still be night. Nights are worse.... because at nights, I have to...

I stop thinking before the bad memories fully came back to me. But just the hint of them made my whole body shudder. That's when I heard her voice.

"Dito?" The same voice as in the memories I was trying to avoid. I should have tried to feign sleep a little longer... this woman is as dense as a brick, yet surprisingly sensitive to my movements. This... sow-like woman.

"Hmm? Five... up already?" I make a show of rubbing my eyes as if I'd only just woken up.

"Dito, continue sleeping." Ah, if I could, I would! I'd actually prefer never to wake up again, if it meant one less night of those huge bags of meat suffocating me...

"It's because you're being so noisy, Five." Still, I can't let my guard down. Who knows what she'd try to do to my defenseless body... not that things go much better when I'm conscious.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"It's okay..." Like hell she's sorry. She's not really. She's only pretending to be considerate. It's all surface-level with her.

"Going through your wardrobe again? This early in the morning?"

"There's not enough time in the day for me! I've got to get as early a start as possible."

"Well, maybe if you didn't change your clothes three or four times in one day you'd have more time. Couldn't you just wear one outfit until evening?" Besides, there's no masking your insides. No matter what you wear, you're still jump a fat lump of flesh. Wrap yourself up in ribbons all you like... in the end a pig is still a pig.

"I can't do that! How could I wear just one dress when I have so many?!" It's almost sort of tragic how someone could have so much to wear yet so little that actually suited them. Strike that... it's hilarious.

"Tell me, Dito, what about these?" I can tell you already they won't look good. Don't you realize those layered gowns just make you look even meatier? Or that those woolen ones make you seem twice as fat? I'll bet you haven't the foggiest idea that your favorite style of clothing, with all the lace and frills, looks worst on you. Like a ham wrapped up as a gift. Talk about bad taste.

“Maybe you don’t like any of these dresses because they seem hard to take off me?” That’s not it at all! Ugh, you’re so gross! Don’t touch me! ...I want to scream, but of course I can’t. No upsetting the Intoner, now. I am her loyal disciple... I must act in a way that pleases her.

“No... that’s not what...” This is what you like, right? Me acting like a cute little boy, blushing and shy?

“Or maybe you’d prefer I wore nothing at all...”

“I-I...” Of course I wouldn’t! Why would I?!

“I don’t mind doing it clothed, either...”

“But...” Whether you’re naked or clothed, I don’t want to do it with a pig!

“I just need to be on top in that case. Or we could do it standing, from behind...”

“I said I don’t...!” I don’t want to have sex with you! The position isn't the issue here!

“There’s no need to be shy...” Believe me, I’m not. I’m rejecting you from the bottom of my heart! ...I could never say that. Not as long as I’m her disciple.

“Dresses! Weren’t we picking out dresses?!” Face as red as an apple, I act flustered. The tone of my voice has become high-pitched as I indicate toward the dresses. So you enjoy this kind of behavior, huh? You hag.

“How about this one? This middle one, here? It’s dazzling!”

“Forget the dresses for now, Dito. Come here...”

“Well, then, how about this one? Check out the detail on this embroidery! You haven’t worn this one yet, have you?” I slip out of her arms, though I know my escape will be short-lived. She likes it when I play hard-to-get, anyway. It’s more exciting for her if her prey tries to get away. Entering her dressing room, I let out a big sigh. The other disciples must have the patience of saints! That or their Intoners are considerably more sane. Maybe they all just have it better than me.

Those two lovebirds from the desert kingdom seem pretty happy. It’s like they’re walking through a perpetual flower field. It’s embarrassing to watch. A disciple’s duty is to satisfy the sexual needs of his Intoner. What’s the point of acting like you’re in love? What kind of freak would fall in love with an Intoner in the first place? Oh, but right... that disciple is a total idiot. No wonder, then. A waste, though, to be so handsome and yet so dumb. I wonder what’s harder, being ugly and intelligent or handsome and dumb? In any case, god seems to be stingy when it comes to giving out good looks and smarts at the same time.

I continue pretending I’m looking for a dress. I make some noise pulling and pushing things off the rack, lest the pig woman check in on me. I’m careful not to tear any fabric, though. Thinking she might get sick of hearing the same sounds, I pull one of her gaudier dresses inside out, but soon realize how pointless what I’m doing is and give up on it. Instead I study the inside-out dress. Its

shiny fabric can't be seen through the back, and the reversed stitching reminds me of veins. It's much prettier this way.

I sort of like things inside-out like this. I wish you could do the same thing to humans; just stick your hands down their throats and yank them clean inside-out. Then all their organs and stuff would be right on display. Imagine if they were still digesting? Then you could see all the food they'd eaten right there in their stomachs. That'd be one heck of a sight. Even that pig woman, if you turned her inside out... she might be cuter then. Instead of the white of her skin, imagine seeing the red and pink of her facial muscles. And her entrails, dangling invitingly... that'd be pretty sexy. I wonder how a moan might sound from an inside-out throat?

...I'm getting kind of hot and bothered.

Time to stop daydreaming. Got to head back into the thick of it sooner or later. Searching for a dress was just a desperate bid to save time. My fate can't be avoided. Carrying a dress she'd bought recently from an eastern salesman, I leave the dressing room. This Intoner likes nothing better than a performance, and the sight of me as her clown. She's got to have some screws loose, alright... but all the same. As I expected, her expression is one of satisfaction. I wish she'd learn to smile a little less vulgarly.

"This dress is lovely, too. But so is this one! Oh, I'm at such a loss..." I'm the one at a loss here. It's tough watching a woman be so engaged in picking out clothes that don't suit her. Pretty depressing.

"I wish I had three or four bodies. Then I could wear these all at once!"

"Three or four of you?! Are you serious?!"

"Of course."

"...that would be a nightmare!" I couldn't help but blurt out my true thoughts. Three or four of her?! That would herald the end of days. I'd sooner hang myself.

"I think it's a splendid idea. Next time I see my sister One, I'll ask her if she doesn't know a spell that could do that." Does that mean we'll have to go see her soon? Man. The eldest Intoner has a sharp mind. She makes me nervous... I've only met her a few times, but something about her rubs me the wrong way. After all, she was the one to command meatball here to rule over this seaside land. Can't thank her enough for that, now can I...

"If there were three of me, I wouldn't have to worry about what to wear. I could eat three times my full, as well!"

"You already eat enough for three people as it is."

"Oh, I do not!" Oh yes, you do! Make it more like five or six. She eats so much I'm surprised the chefs here haven't died of exhaustion yet!

"When the cooks ask if you'd prefer meat or fish for dinner, you always say both."

"Okay, my dear Dito. That's still only two people's worth."

“Then when they ask how you’d like your meat prepared, roasted or sautéed or boiled, you say all three!”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

“And then when they’d ask how you’d like your fish, grilled or baked or fried...?”

“I suppose I ask them to prepare all three. Oh no, now I’m hungry. Is breakfast ready yet?”

“Five, your gluttony knows no bounds...” If I could, I’d ask her smart older sister for a spell to diminish her appetite.

“I can’t wait for spring. Then I can go searching for scrumptious new things.” Hunting and foraging was a hobby of hers. But scrumptious is not the word I would use to describe what she brings back...

“You mean things not fit for human consumption.”

“Oh, but Two cooks them wonderfully! She has a knack for making delicious meals out of them.”

“You don’t deny that they’re usually inedible, though.” How could she? Stuff like troll, orc and goblin meat... even sandworms. That’s called monster hunting, not ingredient gathering.

“Two makes goblin brain into a delicious pate. Then there’s her spiky lizard stew, and her pickled six-eyed monster fish...” No sane person would eat any of that crap. Never mind their twisted libidos, there’s also something seriously wrong with the Intoner taste buds, too.

“I guess you could consider it gourmet eating?”

“You think so?”

“Sure, dining on food you risked your life procuring could be a whole new culinary trend. I’ll pass on it, though...” My measured response was due to my Intoner’s influence. I really wanted to ask her what kind of animal would ever consider eating the crap she was describing.

As I was thinking that, my eyes were forced back on her. I hate it when she makes me do that.

“Um... Five?” I could feel my face going slack as I looked up at the pig woman.

“What are you thinking right now...? Something strange...?” Like I needed to ask. I’d know that lustful expression from a mile away.

“Not at all...” Yeah, right. Sex is all you think about.

“H-how about breakfast? You’re hungry, right?”

“Yes. I’m going to dig in right now...”

“Five! Wait-” Aren’t I a tragic hero? Forced to act in this charade?

“No, I won’t wait... not anymore...” It’s in an Intoner's nature to be perverted and lewd. Perhaps it’s connected to their singing abilities. As if that makes any sense at all... How can I sympathize with a

nymphomaniac who gives me no peace, day or night? I can't. No matter what the circumstances may be.

"Why are we doing this first thing in the morning...?" I'm annoyed by my own complaining. I should know there's no point. I almost want to knock my own mouth shut!

"Because of your cute, sleepy little face..."

"That makes no sense."

"Don't you like sleeping with my big breasts as a pillow?" Ahhh... I give up.

I wish she would at least stop licking me all over like that. It makes me feel all gross and sticky. It's the worst. She's got no technique, either. The smell of her saliva, her body fluids... I want to throw up. I wish I could... I'd feel better for it. But that her anger her, for sure. Her voice is what I really can't stand. Sounds like someone strangling a chicken. This is the pits. My body is all sticky, my ears full of that awful sound, and those two sacks grinding against my stomach as she writhes on me... I can't think of a worse torture than this. I wonder if that old man with the rings wouldn't switch with me. I'm sure he wouldn't mind being this woman's partner... seems like he'll do anything with a hole. There's probably no man more suited toward being a disciple than that one. I'd like a spell to make three or four of him. Hey, that's not a bad idea. I'll ask big sis One about it myself, next time I see her...

God, when are you going to be done?! You're so heavy. Get off already, you hag! I wish I could kill you! There's no way I could though. I've already tried to. But when I went to stab her from behind...

"What are you doing, Dito? Naughty boy." The moment I heard her voice, my sword was at my feet. My hands had lost the strength to grip it. No disciple can defy their Intoner. No matter what. I learned the truth that day... just remembering what happened makes me want to die. I want to die.

Why did I have to be her disciple? Why couldn't I have gotten a different Intoner? I'd have liked to serve under another one instead. But maybe they're all the same... who knows? Still, no one could be worse than her. Those two in the desert seem happy, the old man is having fun... it's not fair that only I have to suffer. Hm? Speaking of which, wasn't there another one of us... the idiot, the old man, me, and... ugh, I forgot. Oh well.

I wish she'd finish already. I've already counted all the cracks in the ceiling. I really don't want to have to get started on the walls...

"No... not yet...!" Not yet what? It's all the same in the end, no matter how many hours you're at it. It's not like you feel anything. To be so lustful yet unable to feel a thing... on that count alone, I pity you. Poor thing... nah, you deserve it.

"My dear, sweet Dito... don't make that face." What face? Am I making a face? Whatever it is, it must be to your liking.

"If your appetite is as much as three people's, Five, your lust is equal to thirty."

“My... what praise!”

“I’m not praising you...”

“Good boy... let me reward you. Where do you want it next?”

“That’s a punishment, not a reward.”

“Oh? You prefer to be punished?” Not really, but it’s all the same in the end. This is torture.

“Why are you so lustful, Five?”

“Am I? Really?” You don’t even realize it? Well, I suppose it’s more than a simple case of lust for you...

An Intoner’s libido is stronger than a normal human’s. But you’re even more different. No matter how many positions you try or how many hours you spend doing it, it will never feel good for you. Do you think sleeping with lots of people will fix that? You’re not satisfied with your dressed because none of them suit you. Do you think new ones will change that? You know that no one would serve you if you didn’t brainwash them. Do you think you’ll ever find someone who honestly loves you?

Unfortunately there is no cure for your lack of sensation. No dress will ever look good on you and nobody on earth is crazy enough to love you. My poor little Intoner... serves you right! ...hm? I feel a crease in my brow. Am I frowning? I touch my forehead, cheeks and mouth. I’m frowning all right. But how? Five would never allow me to frown...

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh...”

“It’s not like you to space out in bed like that.” I’m a little shocked, to be honest. But Five quickly regains her composure. Before I know it, she’s back to her gluttonous old self. I can tell because my voice and facial muscles are going out of my control, just as usual.

“Don’t be mean... I have matters on my mind, as well.”

“Are you mad?”

“No...” You’re lying. You must be, or else why is my voice coming out so soft? Why is my face contorted in fear? Are you mad I interrupted your reverie? Or that I noticed you were distracted? Disciples cannot disobey their Intoners. That’s right... I can’t raise so much as a finger against this woman. I am made to act the way she pleases, to say words that delight her. I am a perfect slave.

I remember you once said this to your kind elder sister: ”I love this boy with all my heart. Every last bit of him! Even his mean and mischievous parts.” Who wouldn’t love a boy who’d do anything they wanted? You like the mean and mischievous parts of me? Please. You regulate just how mean I am, and never allow it to surpass your expectations. Any part of me that doesn’t fall in line with

your image of me, you suppress. The proof of that is in my inability to utter a single word of truth to you, even now.

“Let’s continue...”

“You’re not done yet?!” I’m not really surprised. I’m just being made to act like I am. My eyes become wide on their own; I didn’t will them to. I just lay back and let it happen.

“Just kidding...” I know you are. I know all of you, after all; your lies, your emptiness, your stubbornness, your desire for control. And you know, I don’t hate the ugliness inside your heart. I can forgive your rotting insides, because...

I’m your disciple.

Everything is for You

(Decadus's Novella)

"Could you die for me?"

These were the first words my mistress, Lady Four, ever spoke to me. I still remember vividly the sound of her voice, the expression on her face, even the clearness of her eyes as she looked up at me. As soon as she had finished speaking, she made a face, as if she were looking at something strange. She gazed at me for a long time; I think perhaps she was still a little unsure of what a disciple was.

I, of course, understood my duty completely. It was to never leave my Intoner's side, to serve her faithfully, to withstand the very fires of hell to protect her… the very fires of hell… fire… burning… ooh!

Uh, erm. That is to say, that was how I understood it. But I wasn't yet sure what Lady Four's exact expectations of me were, this being our first meeting. As a result I found myself unable to answer her at once. But Lady Four did not get angry. Instead, as if blaming herself, she continued thus:

"Oh… I'm sorry. What I meant was, would you be willing to die for an Intoner, one responsible for protecting this world? That is… could you put your life on the line for the sake of this world? I-I didn't mean you should say you'd want to die for me personally…"

This time I answered promptly. "Yes, of course. If it is to serve you, I am ready to withstand any trial, no matter how torturous… torture… ooh!"

"Decadus? Are you all right?"

"Y-yes! I'm just fine." Lady Four shows such concern for others.

"What I can't accomplish alone, we can surely accomplish together, as a pair… I think a disciple's most important duty toward his Intoner is to act as a partner." Furthermore, she is incredibly intelligent and high-minded. I am proud to serve such an outstanding person.

"Ah! But don't misunderstand me, okay? When I say partner, I don't mean it in a weird way! I'm not the kind of person who interprets everything in only the most vulgar way… like my younger sister. Oh, but I mean…"

"Of course I will serve you in full capacity in that area as well!" Yes. To serve as the partner of an Intoner in the bedroom is another of a disciple's duties. But is it truly all right for someone such as myself to be Lady Four's lover? Before a personage such as herself, I am as insignificant than a stone in her path… one to be stepped on, or kicked… kicked… ooh! Kick me, please!

"I-I just said, that isn't how I meant it! Are you s-stupid or something?! I'm different! We may be siblings, but don't put me in the same category as my wanton, breast-obsessed little sister! I'm completely different than that girl! I think with my head… not my loins! T-that's right! What's important to me is your heart, not your body! Understood?!"

"Yes! Of course, my lady!" I knelt at Lady Four's feet and earnestly begged her forgiveness for the sin of having upset her.

"Please excuse my impudence! I have not enough words to apologize to you! I will accept any punishment, however cruel, you deem fit to give me! Make it as harsh as you desire! I don't mind if you kick me, or even whip me!" Kick me… whip me… whip… ooh!

"Now, my lady! Do not hesitate! Punish your Decadus!"

"H-hold it, raise your head off the ground! I don't think you did anything worth being punished over…"

"No! No! I insist! To have soured your mood… I am a failure as a disciple! Punish me, please!"

"I said it was all right! I'm not going to punish you!"

"…you're not?" You're not going to whip me? Or even give me just a little kick? To leave me high and dry like this… it's torturous! Wait. Torture? Oh! I get it! Lady Four, I see what you're doing! This is your punishment! What a sublime… sublime type of torture!

"It's okay already, so get up! Are you listening to me?" Ah… my lady! Even though this is our very first meeting, it's as if we've known each other for years. For you to have grasped my desires so completely! No words could express the depth of gratitude I have for being lucky enough to serve under such an amazing Intoner like yourself!

"Could you die for me?" The second time Lady Four asked me that question was just after she'd taken control of the mountain lands, and we were setting out to exterminate monsters together.

Even after we'd dethroned the corrupt lord, the mountain lands were infested with all manner of violent, vile beasts. The many hiding spots the terrain supplied made it their ideal environment to nest in. As expected of her, Lady Four did not hesitate to set out to subdue these beasts herself in order to assuage the troubled populace. However, the soldiers serving her protested strongly. Even if the chances were one in a million, they could not bear the thought of something happening to their precious Intoner.

"Thank you for your concern. But it's quite all right! I have the power of song, and my loyal disciple to protect me." Lady Four gave the soldiers a smile before turning to me. That's when she repeated that question.

"Could you die for me?" I understood she had asked it in order to relieve the soldiers. As expected of my kind and considerate lady. Without hesitation, I replied:

"Of course! I will defend you with all my strength. No matter what terrible beasts assault us, I will use my own body as a shield to protect you… a shield that gets hit… and stabbed… ooh!"

"Decadus?" For a moment I thought I saw Lady Four make a troubled expression, but it must have just been because of my poor word choice. Thinking what I had said was not yet enough to put the soldiers at ease, I continued:

"To protect you, I will become anything. Even your shoes… no, the soles of your shoes, under your feet!"

"I'd prefer you didn't." Apparently Lady Four did not wish for me to become the soles of her shoes.

On the mountain roads, monsters appeared one after the other. It was an extremely dangerous place, and the walk up to it hadn't been easy, either. We'd been in constant danger of falling rocks and precarious cliffs the whole way; the former lord apparently had not cared a whit about making things more safe for his people.

"I'll command the soldiers to keep things safe and clear on the paths leading in and out of the city. As it is, there's no way the elderly or young children could traverse these roads. And to make sure no monsters get near, I'll have to set up a constant, all-night patrol. Oh, but perhaps I'll leave the path leading to the shrine infested… to prevent thieves and intruders." We weren't just exterminating monsters. Lady Four was using this opportunity to survey the terrain and come up with new strategies and plans. No matter what the time or situation, her heart was always full of concern for the people. It was if she were born to lead them.

"Still…" Coming to a stop, Lady Four gave a sigh.

"I knew the prior lord was a villain, but to let things worsen to this state… how cruel!"

"Y-yes… so very… cruel… ooh!"

"What?"

"N-no. Just a slip of the tongue…" Lady Four gave me a suspicious look, but said no more. It wasn't the time to, considering a new bunch of monsters had rushed in from the side. We assumed our battle stances.

Just as I had promised before the soldiers, I became a wall between the beasts and Lady Four. I also served as her sword, slaying many of them for her. Actually, though, I prefer not to fight with weapons. Instead I utilize my own arms and legs. As opposed to a sword or spear, when you use your own body to attack you get a better feel of just how much damage you're inflicting upon the enemy. And also, how much damage you yourself are receiving. With each blow of my fist, the shock from the impact travels from my hands to my brain… the stronger the foe, the more clear and painful the feedback to my hands and feet. For example, were I fighting a golem with a hard, stony body… the pain my fists would receive would be… would be… ooh! Just imagining it, I… I can hardly…!

"You seem happy, Decadus."

"Using my body to protect you is my greatest pleasure, Lady Four! For your sake, I wouldn't mind it even if I were split in two… split in… two… ooh! I can't take it!"

"Really? It's not the pain in your fists making you happy?"

"H-how did you…?!"

"If you want to keep things like that a secret, try not mumbling so loud!" Something in Lady Four's voice turned very cold.

Ever since we'd returned from that mission, I got the feeling Lady Four was speaking to me less. I also felt her eyes had become harder, more chilly. Not that I was dissatisfied with that. Just the opposite, really! Oh, her gaze that seemed to pierce me like a blade made of freezing ice! Piercing me deeply… deeply… ooh! To think Lady Four could torture me so effectively without laying a single finger on me. It was almost intolerable! What a gift she had for exciting me!

Ah, but excuse me. Putting that aside, lately I've felt as if Lady Four is trying to avoid eye contact with me. Perhaps it is just my imagination? No… I don't think so.

What's important to me is your heart… that's what Lady Four told me when I first met her. In other words, even if we do not speak… or our eyes never meet… what Lady Four desires is a disciple who can understand her heart. To be unable to do so would make me unfit to serve her.

Though I am ever at her side, Lady Four behaves as if she were alone. But this makes sense! After all, a disciple is meant to act as his Intoner's shadow. A shadow to be stepped on… ooh… to be stepped on… Lady Four, how is it you understand me so completely? How blissful it is for me to serve such a perfect master. My joy is so great it almost scares me!

"Could you die for me?" The third time she said those words was quite recently. It had been the first time in a long while that she had spoken to me. Even if I don't say it, you must know my life is yours. All of me exists solely for your benefit.

"Of course! For your sake, Lady Four, I would endure pain worse than death. Worse than… death… ooh!"

"…I see."

Lady Four replied curtly, before turning her back on me. I thought I heard her whisper "Just die now, then.", but the voice in which she said it was so much lower than her usual pitch, I may have been hearing things.

Actually, it must have been the creaking of her bedroom door I heard instead. It's a very, very old door. Tomorrow, after Lady Four awakens, I'll have to take the time to grease its hinges.

After the door had closed with a loud creak, I silently bowed in its direction.

"Good night, my lady. Sleep well…" Then, as I did every night, I sat before the door to keep watch.

In addition to being old and noisy, my lady's bedroom door did not do much to muffle the sounds from within. To be frank… I could easily hear everything going on inside it, especially as the night grew later and more still.

As I sat on my knees before that door, I often hear the sounds of the bed frame creaking and my lady panting. It does make me feel a bit guilty, especially whenever I hear her call out sweetly for her older sister in her sleep.

There are those amongst the soldiers who spread rude rumors that she's trying to be seductive, offering herself up to me… but that is incorrect! Completely and utterly!

To have me sit and listen before that door… to even leave it unlocked as she does… none of that suggests seduction. She could take me into her room at any time, which is exactly why she leaves me out of it. Furthermore, she makes me sit upright on the cold floor… which, as my legs grow ever more numb… the sounds of her voice crying out and the rustling of clothing enters my ears…

What perfect… artful teasing! What perfect… masterful torture!

Just after I had first begun to serve her, I often imagined being smashed under her cold heels, or being torn up by her long, sharp nails… but now I realize how shallow those fantasies were.

I don't require the feel of her heels or nails. Between Lady Four and I, there is no need for physical contact. Lady Four bestows upon me joyful pain enough without it. This is what she meant by being partners! We are truly connected, heart-to-heart!

Without ever touching her person, or even my own… no, exactly because we do not touch, these maddening pleasures continue indefinitely! Outside of her door, teased by my growing lust, I am earnestly tortured… earnestly ignored… all throughout the night. I wish time could stop, that dawn might never come, so that this could continue eternally. Oooooh!

Just imagining it, I… I can hardly… oooooh!

What… what… torture! What extreme torture! No… no… this is a reward! Being left here, cruelly neglected… that itself is my reward!

Ah! Could there be anything more pleasurable?!

The Joy of…

(Octa's Novella)

I am known as Octa, disciple to the Intoner who reigns over the forest lands, Lady Three. Today I have accompanied her to the Cathedral City at the call of her elder sister, Lady One. This city is known as the birthplace of magic, and it is the bastion of both the knowledge and arts of the old world.

Of particular note is its library which holds a truly impressive assortment of texts, both new and old, from the world over. Most are written in languages I cannot understand, but there are I few I can decipher. Take this one. It reads… Diogenes Laertius? Is this an ancient history book, or perhaps a biography? I can understand the individual words but the contents are beyond me.

The next book I attempt to read to much easier to understand, not to mention considerably more interesting. It details the existence of an island nation far to the east that was known as the Land of Gold. That is, they produced so much gold that they used it to build palaces and homes. What a dazzling place it must have been! I also learned of its ancient enjoyment techniques known as The 48 Hands. Just 48? That seems a bit of a meagre number for a country known for its richness in gold. Perhaps it's a misspelling and they truly meant The 4800 Hands? Not to brag, but I myself am the master of 666 enjoyment techniques, my proficiency in which is both a source of pride as well as my reason for living. Ho ho ho ho! Of course, even now I still practice all of them nightly. Before I've left this earth I'd like to increase that number to 6666. Ah, the path of self joy is a long one, indeed!

But back to the books. How about this one? It appears to be on health. No… beauty techniques. It seems it is geared toward women. Let's see, now… it reads, how to become beautiful through pleasure? Well now, this is a subject right up my alley. Beauty concerns are of the upmost importance to any lady, and the concerns of ladies are also my own. Though Lady Three, already quite beautiful, isn't much interested in this sort of thing.

Still, I feel I must study this book in greater detail. I, Octa, always endeavor to make use of all my skills in order to give women the deepest enjoyment. While I'm able to bring them to ecstasy in about two seconds flat, I am trying to aim for more than just speed. Instead of resting on my laurels, I want to reach higher heights. To put it more succinctly, I want to become a pleasure athlete.

To accomplish that goal, studying is of the utmost importance. They say knowledge is the mother of all virtue, and if so, it must also be the mother of enjoyment. Which would make books something like the grandmother. All paths lead to joy.

Moving on to the next book, let's see here… it appears to be another book on health techniques. Forest Therapy is the title. Well now! This is required reading for someone who lives in a forest, like me.

Just as the name implies, the forest lands are mostly covered in thick woods. That said, it's easy to traverse through and is really rather relaxing. It's a nice place to indulge in some enjoyment, as well. Thanks to it being rather dark even during the day due to the shade, and the branches and bushes

being good for concealment, you could carry on with any kind of pleasure you wish, be it self joy or group joy. On beautiful moonlit evenings its ideal for some night joy, as well. I can't think of a more ideal place to enjoy the outdoors. And to think, there are therapeutic techniques to be employed while in it, as well! Truly the definition of two birds with one stone.

I must inform Lady Three of my discoveries. Lately she has been utterly obsessed with making dolls, and I'm a little concerned she is not attending to her health as she should. This is her regular routine, however. Once she becomes fixated on something she neglects to eat or even sleep. There was one occasion where she even stopped cutting her hair. By the time I realized it had grown so long it covered the entire floor of her room like a carpet, with nary a place for me to step.

Apparently ever since she was young, Lady Three has liked to cut her own hair, but since taking up doll making she's mostly forgotten about it. While she does still enjoy playing with her scissors, it seems doll making has trumped even that in her mind. As a result, lately I have been the one trimming her hair.

On to the next book, then.

The one would appear to be on the topic of social manners. How to Be a Better Speaker… is the title. I suppose its a help manual for those who struggle in making conversation? Tips for making good first impressions, even if you're shy… the weather and food make good general topics, but avoid the subject of politics and religion… Sure enough. Talking about the weather and food make for a decent enough icebreakers. But neither topic comes close to the connection you'd make discussing your personal enjoyments! Indeed, pleasure talk makes for the greatest social lubricant. Well, to be sure, there are some who'd be made uncomfortable by such a topic, and its never unwise to approach such subjects with a bit of care. Fortunately I find most of the soldiers under the employ of Lady Three to be open to such discussions, however. On the nights they're up late keeping watch the conversation always seems to inevitably turn to them, perhaps to stave off sleepiness. Ho ho ho!

There are times Lady Three must lead us into battle. Since she quickly falls to sleep, I often have to find ways to entertain myself alone at the campground. Most of the time I participate in some self-joy, but occasionally I enjoy speaking with the soldiers accompanying us. I remember well the time I told them I had slept with a faerie woman. All of their eyes went as wide as dish plates when they heard me. Oh, it was quite funny indeed! Hee hee!

"B-but how?!"

"Isn't that physically impossible?!"

"That's beyond all reason!"

"Don't tell me you shrunk yourself?!" It's true that those of the faerie race are small enough to fit in the palm of your hand. In comparison, my member would seem colossal. I could understand why the soldier's struggled with the idea.

I spied one, however, who instead of looking mystified was nodding his head as if in understanding. When the others asked him why he didn't seem surprised, he replied in a perfectly even tone of voice:

"I just assumed he shoved the faerie up his asshole." Having said that, the wide eyes of the soldiers turned off of me and squarely onto him.

Without commenting on how accurate his assessment was, I have to say, I was quite impressed by his fluid way of thinking. I never thought I'd encounter such a like-minded person in a place like that. It was quite the happy occasion for me. Keep your thinking fluid and your member hard… that's my personal motto.

It would be most accurate to say that I consider every hole in the world a potential lover. Whether they belong to someone of a different race like the faerie woman is hardly of any concern. What seems unnatural to me is not being able to chose a partner or use my body freely.

"Master Octa, tell us how you managed it!" All the soldiers were looking up at me with faces shining with the light of curiosity. This is how I answered:

"Clear your mind of all mundane thoughts and you will find even fire cool."

This was apparently an old religious saying from a distant eastern country, but it perfectly described my point of view. Before my ardent will to feel pleasure, trivial matters such as mere differences in size hardly acted as a deterrent. In other words:

"It's a secret, my boys." Some things are even more exciting when left to the imagination, I find. Ho ho ho ho!

Ah, but I've gone on too long. I don't often get this opportunity, so I really should continue looking through these books. This next one is… ah, it appears to be a collection of famous old sayings.

"Toil conquered the word, unrelenting toil and want that pinches when life is hard." These seem to be the words of some poet of yore. I see… If you were to replace the word toil with pleasure, I would be in perfect agreement.

"The hand is the tool of tools." Oh, now these are wise words! Truly those of a most enlightened philosopher! Surely he was one of the greatest minds of his time. Hands are indeed the greatest tool in the pursuit of pleasure. All manner of enjoyments can be had with a set of able fingers!

"Heaven doesn't make a man better than others, nor does it make a man worse than others." This is a saying for the ages. I, too, believe heaven has made no hole better or worse than the next. All holes are equal! In other words, allowing things like age, sex, race… even species dulls your ability to truly enjoy pleasure. Each hole has its own unique features and charms. Discarding your prejudice and liberally accepting every hole with open arms is the key to a truly enriched life. Ho ho ho!

Now it's about time to finish up my reading. Soon Lady Three will awake from her nap; or rather, it'll be time for me to wake her. For as obsessive as she is about her interests when awake, once she

falls asleep it's nigh impossible to rouse her. I do wish I could have found a book that might have appealed to her. I think it would be healthier for her to have a variety of interests as opposed to just one obsessive one, but I also know better than to think its possible to change her nature.

Hm?! W-what is this book?!

It seems to be some sort of textbook, but on what subject? It doesn't seem to be about math, history or science. Is it perhaps about astrology? No… but it does seem to concern stars.

Within its pages I find text detailing an enormous hole that exists far, far off in the depths of the skies above. It is described as being able to absorb anything and everything, from gigantic beasts to monstrous boulders, even mountains, continents and other stars! It sucks up all kinds of matter with ease. To me, a man who considers all the holes in the world his lovers, to learn of a hole of that dimension… how I would relish the chance to engage it! A hole that sucks in everything would be the perfect challenge for Octa, the man who loves every hole! To pursue that passion I would gladly travel to the ends of the earth and even venture into the heavens!

I must train even more devotedly for that day. To start with, I'll engage in some special pleasures tonight with Lady Three. Exhausting every technique, I'll bring her holes unparalleled enjoyment!

As they say, a journey of a thousand joys begins with the first step.

**NOTES: Diogenes Laertius is a Greek philosopher.*

Japan was once known as The Land of Gold due to the amount of gold they used to produce and export until around the Edo period, apparently. In other words, Octa is referring to Japan.

The 48 Hands are a series of sex positions, sometimes referred to as the Japanese Kama Sutra.

And here are the quotes Octa is blaspheming and who they're attributed to: Clear your mind of all mundane thoughts and you will find even fire cool. - Words attributed to a Buddhist monk as the shrine he was in burned down around him. Toil conquered the word, unrelenting toil and want that pinches when life is hard. - Virgil The hand is the tool of tools. - Aristotle Heaven doesn't make a man better than others, nor does it make a man worse than others. - Yukichi Fukuzawa The journey of a thousand miles starts with the first step. - Lao Tzu

The Jewel in My Palm

(Cent's Novella)

"Are you okay, Cent? You're not hurt anywhere, are you?" Said my mistress, the Lady Two, after felling the last of the monsters with her great sword. I knew she would ask; an disciple like me can fathom what the Intoner he serves might say before she says it.

"Not at all. Of greater concern is you, Lady Two…" The state of her own body was far more important than my own. After all, she had just finished slaying a Minotaur that was two… no, three times her size, and in the middle of a desert, no less. The sweltering sun rays and the merciless gales were just as much our enemies. In terms of unabated harshness, I could imagine no worse a battlefield in the entire world than the one we stood in now.

And yet all my Lady had to say was:

"I told you not to call me Lady! When we're alone, you promised to just call me Two!" While puffing her cheeks out in annoyance. I would think my query in regards to the state of her health at the moment held more importance than that, but… the more I looked at those puffed up cheeks, I forgot my concerns, overwhelmed with the desire to poke them with my fingers since they were so cute.

"Forgive me. Two… are you uninjured?" Her puffed up, pouty cheeks turned into an ear-to-ear smile in less than a millisecond.

The truth is I hadn't forgotten our promise. It's just that I like seeing her make that face, so I sometimes pretend that I have. By doing so, I get to see her make two adorable faces in her row: first the cheeks, then the smile. I admit to being a bit of a schemer.

I'd also like to mention that there are two reasons why I prefer to refer to her formally. The first is, that it is proper etiquette. That is why I insist she let me maintain airs before the eyes of others.

The second reason, which I haven't disclosed to her… is because her existence is one far more precious than my own. I should think any man, confronted by a woman so much more important than himself, would feel compelled to call her Lady.

That's right; Lady Two, you are a million times more important than myself, handsome and multi-talented as I am. I'll have you know, too, that there aren't many people out there I'd so easily accept as being above me, either. Indeed, in that sense you are exceedingly rare.

This would hold true even were you not an Intoner. Our relationship as Intoner and disciple is a mere pretense. For example, if my master were a different Intoner and not yourself, I assure you that our relationship would be purely professional. Were it Lady One or Lady Three, Lady Four or Lady Five… it would all be the same. I would never sacrifice all twenty-four hours of my day to them as I do for you. I'd put the bare minimum amount of work in and be adamant about taking time off. I would merely perform my duties as a disciple and nothing more.

You aren't important to me because you are an Intoner, but because you are you. And that is why I call you Lady, and always will, at least within my heart.

But I see that saying it aloud too often makes you look lonely. I love your puffy, pouty cheeks but I would never want to see you making a pained expression. So I've been cutting down on the number of times I pretend to have forgotten, even if it is just a trifle.

Now then, Two… no, Lady Two. Uh, what was I going to call you by next? All this internal monologuing made me forget…

"Cent?" Your eyes peer up at me curiously. What a busy pair of eyes they are… shining with laughter, glinting with anger, widening in surprise. Perhaps you are the true schemer. Artlessly, without even the use of your songs… just by moving the muscles on your face, you've made such a prisoner of me.

"Cent! I can tell you want to mess with my cheeks again. Well, you can't! If you keep yanking on them, they'll get all stretched out!"

"That is certainly not my intention. I was merely trying to stimulate them, to improve blood flow. This is an exercise to improve your complexion."

"What? Really?! Wow! Do it more, then!" …that was a fib. Forgive me, Lady Two! Your cheeks are just too soft and cute. I can't help myself.

"Q-quit snickering! I forbid it!" Now you've gone all red. No matter what you say or do, you are so lovely that not just I, but all the people in our country simply adore you. Your people would do anything for you, and indeed they long to. But…

"If you continue exterminating monsters on your own like this, the troops will have no work to do."

"But I can't let them do something so dangerous. What if they get hurt?" The soldiers wish to do all they can to protect their Intoner. Yet this is what she always says. Well, the truth is that Lady Two is capable of defeating numerous giant, blood-thirsty minotaur (albeit with my assistance). Even if they have the will to do so, none of them could do the same amount of work as she can on her own. If they are to truly be of use to her, they need to be trained to become stronger.

"This was a surprise, though. To think Minotaur would be nesting here…"

"There is a water source not far off. That's likely the reason they chose this location."

"Right… and human roads are nearby as well." It was the western caravan that came rushing to us, panicked, saying they'd discovered a monster nest. However, as they were too flustered to speak properly, they were unable to tell us what kind of monster they had been attacked by. Even if they could speak more clearly, though, the result would have been the same, as Lady Two rushed out before they'd even finished reporting. I imagine the thought of her people being attacked by monsters did not sit well with her.

"Those Minotaur were pretty tough. One, two, three… there were seven of them in all. I had trouble concentrating since I was so worried they might hurt you, Cent."

"A wound or two would be a fair price to pay to protect you." Lady Two's expression told me she did not agree. Of course I knew she wouldn't.

"As you can see, however, I am without a scratch." Still, it is the duty of a disciple to put everything on the line in order to defend their Intoner in the heat of battle. If I wasn't prepared to do that, I'd be a failure as her guardian.

"So, what should we do with these?"

"The Minotaur, you mean?"

"Even we can't carry all seven back. I'll take two… Cent, you can take one… yeah, three is about the most we can manage at once. So… what to do about the other four…" I knew it was pointless to suggest leaving them behind. For Lady Two, this wasn't an option, since Minotaur meat is edible. Actually, it tastes a lot like buffalo. People in more fruitful lands might balk at the idea of eating monsters, but that's just what we do in this desert country. Of course, there are those even here that would resist the idea of eating Gigas or Goblins. But thanks to Lady Two's exhaustive culinary experiments, they've become regular fixtures on the dining table.

"Perhaps first we should move the remaining bodies back into their nest." Unlike Sand Worms, Minotaur cannot live within the sands, so they tend to build their nests within the rocks that litter the desert. They are cool and shield the beasts from sunstroke.

"They should probably hold up for half a day within the shade. In the meantime we can enlist the soldiers to come carry them back. How is that?"

"Great idea! Cent, you are soooo smart! Okay, then let's move them, lickety-split!" Lady Two's strong point is how quickly she acts after making up her mind. Lifting the gigantic Minotaurs as if they were as light as a feather, she indeed moved them back into their nests 'lickety-split'. I have to admit to still being impressed by the displays of her strength.

"Are you not tired at all?"

"Nope! I am A-OK! Oh, but… I'd like it if you did 'that' again."

"'That'?"

"You know, massage me like you did after the time I played with the kids." Ah… 'that'.

"As you wish." A few days ago I had massaged her shoulders after she had finished playing outside with the children. Apparently she did not realize it herself, but they were very stiff.

Lady Two is in possession of muscles which quite exceed those of normal people's. How else could she lift whole Minotaur over her head like that? If she doesn't take care to restrain her power, she can pull doors straight off their hinges or yank banisters right out of the ground. In fact, this happens fairly often. So when she plays with the children, it requires her utmost concentration so as

not to hurt them. Restraining herself in this way puts more stress on her body than fighting Minotaur in the desert would, and after a day spent frolicking with the children her shoulders and arms are tense and she is extremely fatigued. Yet Lady Two does not try to cut down on the time she spends with the little ones. No matter how busy her day gets, she strives not to neglect them. That is how important they are to her; she considers them no different than her own flesh and blood sisters. They are her family.

Should one come down with a fever or get an upset stomach, she becomes so fretful she cannot eat. I try to tell her that small children often come down with fevers or throw up their food, and that skipping meals each time to nurse them isn't good for her health, but to no avail. Even though Lady Two understands what I tell her on an intellectual level, she's unable to control her feelings. All that matters to her is that they recover as soon as possible.

That all I am capable of doing in such times is endeavoring to relieve her stress by even a hair is honestly a bit frustrating, but…

"All better! That felt great, Cent. Thanks!"

"You are very welcome."

"Okay! Let's head back!" Jumping to her feet, she resembled a little rabbit or squirrel. To be honest, sometimes I worry she'll take off running like one, never to return. Of course I realize this is a groundless fear. She would never think to disappear somewhere, abandoning the country over which she governs…

"I'm glad I got to hunt these guys down before I had to leave the country." …for she is always, always thinking first and foremost of the people under her care.

"Since pests like these inhabit the desert, I can't afford to leave very often."

"That's true. And it's never sure when you might have to leave, since you must come when Lady One summons you."

"You're right…" Perhaps those were not the right words to say. For a moment, Lady Two's face became clouded with the thoughts of the enemy she would soon have to face. Even with my help, there was no doubt this would be a bitter battle for her.

Ah… please, do not make such an expression. Sorrow does not suit you.

"It's all right. What Lady One is working toward is a world in which everyone can live in peace. All the people of the world support you, their saviors, the Intoners. There is no way you'll be defeated."

"…right! If we work hard, everyone will become happy." The shadow on her face lifted a bit.

"And I will be ever by your side. No matter what the time or place, I live to protect you, Lady Two."

"Yes… stay with me forever. Promise me you will."

"Certainly." Finally, her smile returned. Yes… that is where it should always be.

"After the battle at the Cathedral City has ended… perhaps we should take a trip together." So that your smiles will become more frequent and joyous.

"Really?! Oh, but… I'd feel bad leaving everyone else behind…"

"How about this, then? We'll make it a journey to exterminate monsters. Soon now there will be none left in our country, so let us make it our mission to hunt down those in other lands."

"Oh, perfect! That will help everyone!" Yes, that is what I like to see. Your smile, as pure and innocent as a babe's. I would do anything to keep that smile on your face forever. To protect that smile, I would sacrifice everything.

"But what about the kids? I can't leave them all alone." You're such a worry-wart, especially when it comes to the children. That's what I love about you, though.

"Why not entrust them to Lady One? There's nowhere safer on earth than the Cathedral City."

"That's true!"

"If we send a few soldiers from our country to accompany them, then it surely will not be a burden on Lady One."

"I'll ask her, then! And have her let us inspect the inside of the Cathedral, too." I'm glad. With this, the anxiety you have over the coming battle has diminished a bit, as have the clouds that hang over your heart.

"Right, then. We'll travel from one end of the world to the next, in hunt of monsters. You did say you wanted to tour the world together, just the two of us, did you not?"

"You remembered…?"

"Even if I forget what I was talking about five minutes ago, I'll never forget any of the precious words you've said to me, Lady Two." That's right. Even should I forget everything else, your smile would remain in my mind. It alone will never fade.

"Oh! You called me Lady again!" Nor would those adorable puffy, pouty cheeks.

"That's because we are in front of your subjects."

"We are?" I could see Lady Two's soldiers in the distance, kicking up sand as they ran toward us. I told them she her safety was assured with me at her side and that they did not need to pursue us, but so concerned were they over their Intoner that they came chasing after us anyway. It's not like I could blame them. I understand very well how they feel.

"Perfect timing. We'll send them to carry back the other Minotaur."

"Great! If we get them all back now, it'll be just in time for dinner. What to make tonight… kebabs? Or should we go all out and roast them whole?" Your expressions which change so rapidly. Each and every one is so truly dear.

"Lady Two…"

"Yes?" I just wanted to say your name, to see you turn around. No…

"Let's go home. Please, give me your hand."

I wanted to hold your hand in my own. I'll never let it go.

Ever.

Our Mistake

(Mikhail's Novella)

"Wah!" I jolted awake, even though it wasn't morning yet and I was still sleepy. It was because something hit me real hard under my chin, where it's sensitive. Oh… it was Zero's leg!

"Zero! Zero! What's wrong?" I nudged her with my nose.

"Are you hurt somewhere? Are you in pain?" She must really be suffering if she's writhing like this in her sleep! Do her wounds hurt so bad that she feels them even in her dreams?

"Zero! Hey, Zero!"

"…I'm tired… lemme sleep…"

"But you're in pain! You're in pain!"

"Shut up. And I always tell you… don't always repeat what you say like that… it's irritating…" Zero's voice sounds super annoyed. Is that also because she's in pain…? It's not just that she's grumpy 'cuz I'm interrupting her sleep, is it?

"What can I do to help you? Tell me, Zero!" I hate seeing Zero hurt! I just hate it! Seeing her hurt makes my chest feel all hurty inside!

"What will make you feel better?"

"Huh…? Ahh… I'll just eat a bunch of meat… and sleep it off… that'll do the trick…"

"So you'll feel better if you eat some meat?"

"Yeah… now let me sleep…"

"Okay! I got it!" I see! So she'll feel better if she fills her tummy with meat! That makes perfect sense! I always feel better with a full belly, too!

"I'll go hunt some meat for you then, okay? Okay?"

"Whatever… and don't… repeat yourself… "

"Zero?" No answer.

"Did you pass out?! Are you okay?! Are you okay?!" I could hear her snoring. She's just asleep.

Being careful not to wake her, I sneak out of the cave we were taking shelter in. It was still dark out, but the moon was nice and bright, making it easy to see. While Zero is sleeping, I'll get her some meat to eat in time for breakfast!

I hope I can find some real yummy meat! Meat so good it'll make Zero all better in no time! Meat that will make her feel like she gained a level with a single bite!

In other words… magical meat! I'm going to find Zero some magical meat!

…but where does magical meat come from? I took to the air but didn't know where to start searching.

I looked down at the ocean with the moon reflected on its surface. And I thought. I thought real hard!

Meat… meat… ocean… meat… ocean meat…

Ocean meat?! Oh! I see lots of fish swimming around just under the waves. They look real pretty, shining silver in the moonlight. Could they be… magical? Should I catch some?

But wait! No! Zero doesn't like fish. I remember having caught a bunch for her one day and she made a face at me. When I asked her if she didn't like fish, she looked troubled and said:

"I can’t eat mackerel…" I think she whispered about it making her remember something. Maybe a time she ate mackerel and got real bad food poisoning. I wouldn’t want to remember that, either!

Okay, so fish are no good. If she eats something she doesn’t like she’ll just feel worse! So I should look for something on land.

I flew away from the ocean. Beating my wings as hard as I could, I raced to find something before sunrise. Before I knew it, I was in the Desert Country. Wow, that was fast, even for me!

Look at all this sand! This desert is almost as big as the ocean!

But even though it was big, I couldn’t find anything to eat there. If it were like the seashore, I could at least find some crabs or something, but no. I looked all over and couldn’t find any meat, just some humans.

Well, aren’t humans also made out of meat? So I guess I did find some, but I don’t like to eat anything shaped like Zero. I’m sure Zero wouldn’t, either. So I kept looking for meat that wasn’t a fish or a human.

I decided to fly somewhere very, very distant. I mean, it makes sense for something magical to be far away from where you are, right? If you didn’t have to travel for it, it couldn’t be very magical, could it? Nothing you can get a hold of so easily should be, don’t you think?

I flew and flew until I started feeling pretty pooped. I looked around to see where I was, when…

"Ow ow ow ow!" I hit my head on a cliff! Since I was looking down I didn’t see it coming. Zero always tells me to pay more attention when I’m flying. Oh, I’m in the Mountain Country! No wonder, then. Wow, and look at all the meat! Cows and sheep and mountain goats all over the place! Wow! Wow! Wowie! I should of come here straight off the bat.

Okay, I’ll catch me a cow, then. With this many around, it’ll be easy pickings!

Hee hee! I caught the biggest cow I could find! This sure is swell!

…come to think of it, I haven’t eaten since this morning. I’m hungry…. and I just love beef!

"I’m gonna dig in!" Mmm! It’s so yummy! It just about melts in my mouth! So good! So good! This might be the best cow I’ve ever eaten!

"I can’t believe I ate the whole thing!" Oh no! It wasn’t supposed to be for you, dummy! Dummy! Zero was supposed to eat it!

"I’ll catch another one! I’ll catch the next biggest cow and bring it straight back to Zero! Straight back to Zero! …huh?" I was gonna go catch another cow, but when I turned around I saw two humans looking up at me. They looked so sad! It was a little old grandma and a little old grandpa. They had tears in their eyes!

I suddenly remembered that Zero once told me that people have these things called farms. Since there are no fields to grow wheat in the Mountain Country, they mostly raise animals here.

Could this… be a farm? And did I… just eat that old couple's cow? I did, didn't I…!

"Waaah! I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" It's not right to steal other people's food! It's not right!

Looking for meat that wasn't fish… or people… or belonged to people… I flew off somewhere else. A place without many humans would be ideal. That way there'd be less of a chance I'd steal their food. I don't want to bother or hurt anybody.

A place without many people, but not devoid of life either, like in the desert…

I found myself in the Forest Country. I'm sure I can find some meat that doesn't belong to anybody here! I heard birds chirping all around me. The forest is full of animals!

I try landing. Trees make it really hard to get on the ground. I hate getting branches all stuck in my craw, too. The sound they make when they snap off is just awful!

"Hey! Watch where you're landing!" Hm? Did I hear a voice telling me not to land? Was it my imagination?

"Hey! Dumb-ass!" Oh, good. He wasn't talking to me. I'm a dragon, not an ass.

"Can't you hear me?! You stinky, filthy, ugly dragon!"

"What? Is there a dragon other than me in this forest? Where is he?"

"I'm talking about you, stupid!" A little creature came buzzing before my eyes. Did he just call me smelly? And dirty? And…

"I'm not ugly! I'm not ugly! You're mean!"

"Yeah, sure, okay! Let me correct myself, then: you're a beastly, hideous, stupid-looking excuse for a dragon!"

"He-day-us? I don't know what that means, but I bet it's something not nice! What are you, anyway?"

"You're a dragon and you've never seen a faerie before? So you don't just look stupid… you really are stupid! Wouldn't the world be better off if you just dropped dead?"

"You shouldn't say stuff like that! It's bad! It's bad!"

"I'm sorry, but haven't you ever heard the saying, only death can cure the fool? Really… just die!" I thought he might just be playing around, but now I'm really starting to think this faerie is out to hurt my feelings!

"Stop that, you! This dragon is right. You shouldn't say such terrible things!" Oh, here comes another faerie! I think this one's a girl.

"Hello, little dragon. What have you come here for?"

"I’m looking for some magical meat!"

"Is that right? Well… you’re in luck! There happens to be some, right up there." The girl faerie pointed to a round looking thing hanging high on a tall tree. It looked about the size of Zero’s head, maybe a little bigger. It was much smaller than I expected!

"That’s magical meat? But it’s so small!"

"It may be small… but it’s truly magical!"

"Really? Well… if you say so!"

"Trust me! And listen… it’s stuck very firmly to that tree, so make sure it pull it as hard as you can! Understand?”

"I do! Thank you!" So magical meat grows from trees! Who’d have thought it? Hm? Do I hear buzzing?

"Hurry, now! Grab that meat!" The faeries were cheering me on from below, so I took the meat in my mouth and pulled it off the tree!

"…ow ow ow ow!” All of a sudden, the inside of my mouth started stinging all over!

"Aha ha ha! He fell for it! I can’t believe it!" A bunch of little needles are stinging my mouth all over! Oh, it hurts! It really hurts!

"How do you like the taste of beehive, baby? It’s tasty, ain’t it? Bwa ha ha ha!" You tricked me! You meanies! …I wanted to say, but I couldn’t.

"Poor ‘lil baby dwagon! Stupid ‘lil baby! Hah hah!" Ow! Ow! Ow! The bees are chasing after me! It’s not my fault, guys! Stop! Stop!

I escaped as fast as I could!

I flew and I flew and I flew… and soon I was back by the ocean. The bees weren’t following me anymore… thank goodness!

Why did those faeries do something so mean to me? They’re so small and cute…

Maybe I knocked over a tree when I landed? And they got mad and punished me? That must be it. I mean, who’d be mean for no good reason?

The sun was already beginning to set. It dyed the sky and ocean bright red.

"Zero must be wondering where I am! I should hurry back!" In the end I couldn’t find any magical meat for her. I guess it was too much for me by myself… all I wanted was to make her feel better…

Letting out a big sigh, I noticed something splashing below me. It was too big to be a fish… I saw sparkling silver scales and a long body and tail.

"Oh, it's a sea serpent!" That's not a fish, or a human, and it sure doesn't belong to anybody! Oh… but it lives in the sea, so… maybe it is a fish? No! It's a sea serpent! A monster! Not a fish!

"It's pretty big… I wonder if I can beat it on my own?" It might be bigger than me… no, no! I'm sure it isn't! Gah! It started hissing me! Hissing at me!

"I-I'm not scared of you!" I blew my fire breath at it. This way I don't have to get too close…

"Hey, no fair!" …but it dove under the water. I can't use my fire, then! I'm going to have to grab it with my claws and bite it to death. To do that, I've got to get real close. It might attack me…

"…this is for Zero! I can do it for her! For her!" I've got to try! So Zero will get better! I'm going to feed her something magical! Taking a big breath, I swooped down toward the sea serpent.

"Take this!" I kicked at the sea serpent's head as hard as I could. Splashing up big waves, I grabbed its neck in my claws.

"Take this! And this! And some of that!" I ripped and I ripped and I ripped and I ripped at it!

"Wah! It's wrapping around me! It's wrapping around me!" I was so focused on tearing at its neck I didn't realize it was wrapping the bottom part of its body around me!

"That hurts! Let go! Noooo!" It was trying to pull me into the ocean with incredible strength. I twisted my body all around to shake it off.

"Why, you…!" I bit into its hard head, my fangs sinking their way in slowly but surely. Sea water got into my mouth and made me almost choke, but I didn't let go!

Zero! Zero! Wait for me! I'm going to bring you something really good to eat!

The sea serpent put up a tough fight, and by the time I'd finally beaten it the sun was almost set. When I got it back to the cave, it was already night. Zero was really mad that I left without saying anything to her, but she forgot to lose her temper when she saw the sea serpent.

"You killed that?"

"I did! So you can praise me… if you want! You can praise me a lot… if you want!" Zero was staring at the sea serpent with wide eyes. Heh heh! Are you impressed? I beat something bigger than me!

"Let's hurry and eat it! You said if you ate lots of meat, you'd get better, right?" I thought I heard the serpent growl, but it was probably just my imagination.

"Just to make sure… you did remember to land the finishing blow on this thing, didn't you?"

"The finishing what?"

"I figured. It's probably just playing possum… agh!" Before Zero could finish speaking, the sea serpent started thrashing about.

"Whaaaat?! Why is it moving?! Why is it moving?!" It was dead a minute ago! Dead as a doornail!

"Because it's still alive! You shitty dragon!" The serpent squirmed out of my grasp! It was hissing at me again!

"It really is still alive!"

"Isn't that obvious?! Ugh!"

"I-I'm sorry~!" I have to beat him again! And fast!

"Wah! He's strong! He's too strong!" I can't believe the serpent is so lively even though we're on the surface now. He's wailing on me with his tail! Oh no! The cave is starting to collapse! Wah! He whacked me with his tail again! That stings!

"Goddamn it! I told you that lie to get you out of my hair, but look what happened!"

"What… you… you fibbed?!" That is soooo mean! I worked so hard to find you magical meat! I went to the forest, the desert, the mountains… everywhere!

"Zero, you meanie! You… you fibster!"

"Shut up and fight!"

"I am! I am!"

"And stop saying things twice!" Ow! Ow! Zero kicked me under the chin again! But… that must mean she's feeling better? Look at her go! Maybe the serpent really is magical?!

Even though I was getting kicked by Zero and smacked around by the sea serpent, I felt soooo relieved!

Visitors

(One's Novella)

January 1st, 999 A.D.

On this, the first day of the new year, the faces of all the people within the Cathedral Capital were filled with joy. With my keen eyesight, I could tell that every last smile was a genuine one. Yes… I could see clearly the sparkle in their eyes, the laughter pouring from their lips… not a single person wore a troubled or forced expression.

Why should they? The scourge of the tyrants lord had been eliminated, the nobility that fostered them dismantled. The people had at last been released from their torment. How long they had prayed for this day to come!

The only person struggling not to frown was me. It was all I could do to keep from covering my ears and falling to my knees… despite my being an Intoner. For a moment I wished I had my sisters with me, but I shook those thoughts from my head. While having all five of us situated in the capital

would surely be heartening to the citizens, it would not make sense to have them abandon the posts which I had only just assigned them to. It wouldn't be long before I had to call them here in any case. Not much time remained before the 'day of promise'.

Facing the people crowding the streets, I gave a wave from atop my steed. This caused them to cheer even louder, and I felt the animal tense beneath me. I am not fond of horses due to their strong odor, but in this case I could sympathize with the beast. We were both being forced to parade our way from the harbor towards the cathedral. I would have preferred to have snuck back after sunset; I wanted to be alone. My mind, exhausted from battle, sorely needed a rest. But I was not allowed to be so selfish. It was my duty as an Intoner to symbolize order and peace having returned to the world, even if that meant being made a spectacle of. And how could the innocent people know that their cries of elation were causing me, with my heightened senses, to feel as if my head were being split in two?

January 27th

In the days following my return to the capital, I've been poring earnestly over the books in the cathedral library. I quite like it in here; the thick tomes muffle sounds from the outside, making it comfortably quiet. And while the smell of dust and must troubles my nose, it is nothing compared my usually having to take in the body odor of humans and animals.

That's right… it's not just my eyesight and hearing that are pronounced. All five of my senses, including taste, touch and smell are torturously sensitive. It wasn't as bad when I was a child. Back then my senses were only slightly enhanced. But as I grew so did they, at a pace that far outstripped my physical development. Before long sounds and smells seemed to be assaulting me. I could no longer enjoy the taste of food due to it being too intense. Even the touch of my own clothes upon my skin made me feel deeply uncomfortably… those days before I developed a method of coping were very hard, and weighed heavily on my psyche. But all of us Intoners have one bodily aspect which develops excessively compared to the rest, as a side-effect of our strength. Perhaps it's silly to expect that those as powerful as ourselves could hope to otherwise live normally.

I heard footsteps approaching. There were two pairs, one leading, the other following. They suddenly came to a stop, however, and seemed to hesitate for a moment before beginning to walk on tip-toes. Soon I heard a gentle knock at the door. From her thoughtful behavior, I could already guess who it was; my energetic yet very gentle younger sister, Two.

"It's open. You made it here quickly, Two…" As soon as I had called her name, the door made a terrible sound and I heard her give a little shriek.

"I-I'm sorry…! I broke it…" Two stood in the doorway, eyes full of tears. In her hand she still gripped the doorknob, the door ripped off its hinges still attached. Just as my senses were overdeveloped, so too were Two's muscles. While she looked quite slight, her arms and legs held the strength of ten men. It was easy for her to break things or hurt people, so Two usually took great care to restrain her movements. That this had happened in spite of her vigilance meant that her strength must have suddenly increased without her realizing.

At least her growth did not affect her appearance. Our sister Three's hair grows at an incredible rate, so much so that she must constantly be cutting it. As a result she travels with a pair of scissors wherever she goes. Then there is Four and her nails; unlike hair which at least doesn't hurt when it is cut, Four is constantly suffering from her nails splitting and breaking. She long had a habit of biting them to keep them down, and struggled greatly to stop doing it. The subject is still a sensitive one for her, and it's sad to see her always trying to hide her hands. Our youngest sister Five is just the opposite, taking inordinate pride in her ever expanding bust. Four would always be muttering that such large breasts on one so young was vulgar and disturbing, but I wonder if she wasn't also jealous, if not of Five's chest than of her bravado. Seeing Five take such pride in her assets must be very frustrating for her.

"One, what should I do…?" Two's voice brought me back to the present.

"Don't be concerned. It was a very old door, already ready to come off its hinges. I'll have someone fix it."

"Really?"

"Really." Two's smile returned in an instant. Her guileless nature remained unchanged from childhood.

"Well! It's nice to see you, Sis! I hope you've been well. It's been such a long time…" Actually, it hadn't. Not much time had passed since we'd suppressed a noble uprising together with her disciple.

"…ha ha. I guess it's only felt like a long time, hasn't it, Cent?" The man beside her nodded. He had a habit of running flipping his jet black hair that struck me as looking very affected, but Two didn't seem to mind. In fact, she was completely taken in by her him, her disciple. Yes… every Intoner must have a disciple, who lives to serve and protect her.

"Are we the first ones here?" When I told her yes, Two's eyes lit up.

"You hear that, Cent? We made it first! Isn't that great?"

"Why, you always come first in my eyes, Lady Two…"

"Aww, Cent… you come first to me, too! I love you most in the whole wide world!" Two proclaimed with blushing cheeks. This was the way these two usually carried on. While it could be embarrassing to watch, I felt an Intoner and her disciple being linked by a strong bond of love was ideal.

…that said, if I left them undisturbed for too long they'd start getting overly affectionate, so I cut in.

"How do things fare in the Desert Country?"

"O-oh yeah! There was this huge minotaur nest, but we got rid of it!"

I'd meant how the nobility there were handling having been stripped of their privilege and whether she had reason to believe they were plotting something, but instead Two briefed me on her hunting monsters, offering shelter to misplaced people and maintaining a steady food supply. Well, I

suppose if this was all she had to discuss it was safe to assume there wasn't anything to worry about. The Desert Country is made up of just that, lifeless desert. Very little can be grown there and the lives of the people are hard. I had given Two the task of governing with the hopes she could lift their spirits with her optimistic nature. Having heard that she was well-loved by her people, with the soldiers in her employ ready to lay down their lives for her, I realized my judgement had not been mistaken.

"Say, would you mind if Cent and I inspected the cathedral to make sure it's safe while we're here? I'm sure you don't." Before I could reply Two had already turned on her heel. I remembered she had wanted to do the same thing when she was here a half year ago, but didn't have the time to. I suppose she wouldn't let the opportunity escape her now. It really impressed me, how little her character had changed over the years. Her disciple gave me a bow before following her out, and I returned to my books.

The reason I was holed up in here wasn't just because it was quiet. I was looking for something. I don't know who gathered them, but this library was full of books from all over the world; one of them must hold the information I seek. I wanted an answer to my dearest question: What are the Intoners, and why do they exist?

February 14th

My sister Four and her disciple Decad arrived much sooner than I'd expected, given the Mountain Country is furthest from the capital.

"I invited Three to travel with us, but she was so busy with her dolls she turned us down." Four said with an exaggerated sigh. The Forest Country Three presided over neighbored Four's domain.

"That's just her way. Don't take it personally." Rather than having been turned down, it was more likely Four had been flat-out ignored. Three was the strangest of us sisters, with a love of dolls stemming back from childhood. Once she became focused on making her own no one's words could reach her. She even forget to eat and sleep; she probably hadn't even noticed Four was there.

"More importantly…"

"You'd like a report on my country, correct?"

"You are quick on the uptake as always, Four." Four's expression beamed with pride, and she began to brief me on the status of the Mountain Country.

"Everything is going smoothly. I mean, how could it not? The population isn't that large and the livable portion of land is rather compact. The former lord must have been a true dim-wit to make such a mess of things." That was correct. If the Mountain Country hadn't been so easy to govern, I'd never have entrusted it to Four. Four is serious and intelligent, but rather immature. Faced with difficulty, she either recedes into her shell or spectacularly loses her temper. There was no way I could rely on her to deal with anything potentially overwhelming.

"It's not the Mountain Country that worries me. Tell me about the Forest Country?" There was a reason behind Four's visit to Three, and that was because I had requested she go take stock of

Three’s land on her way here. Truthfully, I’d been worried; assigning Three to govern there had been a gamble on my part.

"Surprisingly, she seems to be managing well! It’s enough to make me re-evaluate my opinion of her. I can’t imagine having to deal with those awful Faeries or those snobby elves." The majority of the people residing in the forest were not human. It was home to faeries and secluded elf villages. But that’s exactly why I thought Three would fare best there.

Non-humans generally do not take well to humans encroaching on them. The key to co-existence with them is to give them ample space to themselves. The previous lord had tried instead to exert control over them, which hadn’t gone well. Three, who had no drive, would not make the same mistake. Also, it was a load off my mind having her in a place where not many had to deal with her. The fewer, the better…

"One?"

"Ah. Excuse me, it’s nothing. Go on."

"That’s all there is to say! There are no problems in either my country or Three’s. With the wicked lords gone, the people lead happy lives. This past harvest was the first they’d ever have in which the fruits of their labor were not immediately robbed from their hands."

"That’s good to hear. Thank you." But though she had just told me there was no more to say, Four lingered.

"What is it?" I could clearly tell she had something she wanted to tell me.

"Are we really… going to fight her?"

"That’s why I called for you all." I said firmly, but Four continued, albeit timidly.

"I don’t see any point in such a battle…"

"Then you’d have us all killed?"

"No… of course not!"

"But that’s what not fighting would mean." Four cast her eyes downward dejectedly.

"One… you’ve changed…"

"I don’t doubt it. But so have we all." Of course we had. We were no longer children. We had to change, if only to keep a hold on our Intoner powers which grew in strength each day. I’ve forgotten, now… how old were we when we realized something was wrong with our bodies?

Why do we possess this power? To maintain the order of the world; I’d known this since I was a child. But how did I know it? Who taught that to me? Four looked unsatisfied, but silently took her leave. Her disciple, Decad, followed after her like a shadow. Their eyes had not met once the entire time they were in the room. Perhaps Four disliked having an older, mild-mannered man as her

disciple. In comparison to Two, she was quite cold. But I noticed that Decad himself did not seem to mind her treatment. It could be that in itself frustrated Four even more.

As soon as I could no longer hear the sound of their steps, I resumed my reading. I had not once let up on my research, yet I'd still been unable to find a scrap of information on Intoners… or disciples, for that matter. Perhaps my way of looking had been flawed. It could be that we were not always referred to as Intoners, but by another name. But there is no way existences as powerful as we would not be recorded. Take our songs, for instance. They were nothing like the usual practice of chanting words to cast magic, and sure to peak the interest to a wizard. Yet none of the tomes on sorcery made any mention of us.

Why can't I find anything? Was the existence of Intoners being purposefully omitted? Had someone wished to censor any mention of us? If so, why?

February 22nd

"Two told me Three isn't here yet. And here I was sure we'd be the last to arrive!" Five said, tilting her head to the side. I wasn't surprised. I knew the last one here would either be Three or Five; Three due to being wrapped up in her doll-making and Five due to surely putting off her departure until the last minute on account of her domain being closest to mine.

"That's why I told you we didn't need to hurry!" Said Five's disciple. As long as he kept his mouth shut, he was a boy of astounding beauty, but as soon as it opened it was all for naught. I believe Four once dubbed him a cheeky little brat. I was of a similar opinion.

"Five, you never listen to a word I say!"

"Why, that's just not true."

"It is so. Take last night, for instance. I kept telling you I was tired, and you still-" I cleared my throat, not caring to hear anymore of what the disciple was going to say.

"Let's keep things short. How are things in the Ocean Country?" Of all the territories, the corrupt lords had the tightest grip on the Ocean Country. Most of the rich and influential nobles resided there, and those who remained hated us intensely for robbing them of what they considered rightly theirs. Of course, their wealth had never truly belonged to them; they had robbed it from the people. We had merely returned it to its rightful owners.

In any case, of all the places a potential uprising might occur, the Ocean Country ranked first. I had feared governing it would prove difficult for Five, but apparently my fears were unfounded.

"You needn't fret. I've long since made all those naughty nobles my slaves." Five said with a giggle and a wink.

"Five has to own people body and soul, after all…" Her disciple said with a grimace.

Ever since she was small, Five couldn't stand not getting what she wanted. As a result, she'd grown quite forceful about obtaining things. Be it an object or a person, Five would not rest until they were

hers completely. This greediness often repelled others, but it seemed to be serving her well in regards to taking control over the entire country.

"And how goes the reconstruction of the harbors?" During our battle with the lord there, we had accidentally laid waste to most of the seafront. It was difficult to keep our powers in check while fighting, even though he tried to be careful. That was just how strong we had grown.

"Well. Trading ships from the East have begun coming into port."

"And that made Five very happy. She exchanged all her diamonds for what the Eastern merchants had to sell." The previous lord had been a woman, and her castle was full of extravagant dresses and jewels which Five quickly claimed for herself. While they ought have gone to the people, I let Five do as she pleased because I was also well aware of her tendency of growing bored with things. No matter how driven she might have been in pursuing something, her satisfaction upon obtaining it was never long-lived and soon she'd discard it.

True to form, Five had grown tired of the treasures within the castle and had deemed to replace them with something new. And she'd repeat this process time and time again, I was sure. But now her fickleness would stimulate the country's trade.

Output was low in the Ocean Country as it did not have many natural resources. There was a fishing industry, but that was not enough to support all the people in there. Only through commerce and trade could it prosper.

"Not just the gems, I sold all the dresses, too. The busts on them had grown too tight for me, after all. My bountiful bosom still seems to be growing." I saw Five's disciple give his shoulders a distasteful shrug at her words. On his face was a spiteful grin that was much at odds with the rest of his delicate features.

"Say that in front of Four and she'll have your head!" He warned Five, which I found ironic considering how he himself said things to anger Four just as frequently. I didn't see the point in voicing this, however.

Two's muscles had grown stronger. Four had been wearing gauntlets which hid her hands, but going by the incessant clacking of her clippers, I could surmise her nails were growing as fast as ever. Of course I was painfully aware of my ever sharpening senses; even here in the library as I was beginning to be able to pick up sounds from the outside. And here Five was telling me her cup size had increased yet again. Would these twisted transformations continue to increase alongside our powers? As a child I had prayed for strength… yet now I feared how strong we might become.

"I understand. Thank you for your report."

Saying I had work to return to, I turned my back on them. I wasn't lying; I was eager to return to my search. Even after all the reading I'd done, I'd yet to find anything remotely relating to Intoners. It was beginning to make me very nervous. Fearing I may find nothing in the end, I flipped through the book pages at a harried pace.

March 3rd

Three arrived exactly on the ‘day of promise’.

Deeply frustrated by the fruitlessness of my research, I had been in the library since the crack of dawn, surrounded by texts. Before I registered her footsteps I heard the sound of her scissors snipping. Behind her lazy footfalls sounded the even pace of her disciple Octa.

"What has two legs in the morning, twelve in the afternoon, and one in the evening…" The door creaked open and I was met by Three’s questioning face.

"…can you guess?"

"You’re late." Was my only reply. There was little point in trying to figure out Three’s riddles as they were mostly meaningless. As a child Three had been very quiet, but since she’d become obsessed with dolls she’d become much more chatty, perhaps as a result of talking to them.

"…has your hair stopped growing?" It had taken me a moment to notice on account of her awful posture, but I realized Three’s hair, which usually hung at her waist, was cut short at her shoulders.

"Oh, no. It’s that I’ve been taking care of my lady’s hair as of late." Said Octa with a laugh. That explained it looking neater than usual. At first glance, Octa seemed a friendly if somewhat eccentric old man. Unfortunately, eccentric didn’t begin to cover him…

"I see." So it was still growing at the usual rate. Of course it was. Why would Three be an exception?

There was a time in which we needed all the strength we could muster. But after the battle today, what use will our power be? What’s the point of it increasing?

"…I’m tired." Three yawned. When not working on her dolls she was extremely lethargic, and these words always preceded her lying on the spot, regardless of her location, to sleep.

"Don’t lay on those books. They’re antiques, you’ll damage them." Three, about to stretch out of a pile of old books, managed to just barely avoid them and lay on the cold floor beside them.

"Why don’t you rest in one of the bedrooms?" Traveling from the Forest Country took nearly as long as the journey from the Mountain Country. Surely both she and her disciple were exhausted, and we had nothing to discuss since I’d already heard about the state of her land from Four.

"What’s the matter?" I’d expected her to either fall asleep there or leave, but Three did neither. Instead she was playing with her scissors, expressionless. I could never tell what she was thinking, and I had a feeling her disciple couldn’t, either.

And yet… sometimes I was struck by the feeling that perhaps my strange sister knew more than I did. Perhaps she had already long ago grasped the answer to the question I was searching for so desperately…

"I won’t sleep."

"But you said you were tired."

"…white." Her inability to hold a normal conversation was also nothing knew. I turned to Octa.

"I have work to attend to. If you wouldn't mind taking her…"

"But of course, my la-"

"Atop the leviathan, its scales whiter than snow, a pink blade." Three cut off her disciple with another riddle.

"Three…?"

"Where does the tip of that blade point? …can you guess?" Three's eyes stared straight into mine. She was no longer talking nonsense; I grasped the meaning of her words. The leviathan with scales whiter than snow… a white dragon, who carried on its back a woman with pink eyes. A woman who pointed her blade toward us… her sisters.

On her way here, Three must have caught sight of the enemy we were to fight this day, as had been promised.

"I suppose I'm out of time." I sighed.

In the end, I couldn't find any mention of Intoners, our songs, our disciples… nothing. My search had been pointless.

"Who is right? Is it you, One? Is it Two… Four… Five? Or… could it actually be Zero?" Three asked with no hint of a smile.

"…all people believe that they are the ones who are right." Or else, how could they fight? No one was strong enough to dedicate themselves to a cause they knew was mistaken. They had to justify it somehow first. My search for an answer had been an attempt to justify my reason for fighting my sister today. Did that mean I doubted myself, my decisions?

"One?" Feeling Three's dubious gaze, I realized I'd been laughing.

It didn't matter whether I had an answer, a justification. Whether I knew what we were or why we existed wouldn't change what I needed to do. I would fight this battle all the same. So what need did I have for doubt?

I closed the book I had been reading and rose from my seat. In the distance I heard the roar of a dragon. There was no mistaking it. The traitor was upon us.

"Let us meet her head on. Today we fulfill the promise we made."

The Gone-Away

(Michael's Novella)

***Note: The following story contains story elements that may be considered spoilers for the plot of *Drakengard 3*.**

As far back as I can remember, I have always found myself on the battlefield. For a really, really long time… that is, since time immemorial, I have fought. Awake or asleep, even in my dreams. How many countless years it has been… the exact number of foes I have vanquished… the very reasons I began to fight… time has obscured it all.

"Lowly insects! Die!"

A hint of my breath was all it took to set the many insects aflame. I watched as they crudely burned and turned to ashes. Weaklings whose strength lay only in their numbers, they could not hope to compare to a dragon such as myself. But burning them in large groups like this never failed to lift my spirits.

“Take this! And that! And some of that!”

By the time my flames had finished bathing the earth, not a single one of the pests remained. Truly a refreshing sensation!

“My name’s… that is, I am known as Michael! Member of the mighty race of dra- Wah!”

A current of pain ran through one of my spread wings.

“Damn! So there are puppets here too, eh?”

Perhaps in possession of slightly more intelligence than the average insect, the things I’d dubbed ‘puppets’ made use of projectile weaponry, which I caught sight of in the gathering swarm below. These guys always gave me trouble… err, what were those spiky thing they’d shoot at me called again?

“Agh! Who cares?! Hateful peons! How dare the vermin that crawls upon the ground attempt to harm a member of the mighty race of dra- Wah! Wah! Wah!”

This time I felt several burning bolts graze my wings.

“Hey! Let me finish speaking, you- WAH!”

The puppets, who had flocked together in greater number than the insects from before, were preparing a giant weapon that took many of them just to move. What’s this, now? Are they aiming it at me?

“…am I in what they call a pinch?”

Should I high-tail it? No… no! A proud dragon never turns his back on the enemy! But… to be honest, this wasn’t looking too good…

“Fool! Do you not see the peril you are in?!”

I heard a voice bellow from beside me, snapping me back to my senses. I saw the great weapon had been enveloped in fire along with the bodies of the puppets who’d manned it.

“Your heedlessness astounds me!”

The one who had come to my rescue was another dragon, scales colored a deep red. Her tone was clearly that of exasperation. Meanwhile, I was feeling torn: should I be moved, having been saved by a compatriot? Or insulted, as a prideful dragon? I was leaning toward insulted.

“Why do you dawdle there with your mouth agape? Do you wish to die a dog’s death?”

“B-be silent!”

We were of the same noble race, yet I found her attitude to be beyond haughty.

“Then make haste and retreat!”

“Y-you don’t have to tell me!”

Frankly, it was beginning to piss me off!

“Rouse yourself, Michael!”

I awoke to the sound of her voice. To think that, of all things, I had been dreaming of my first encounter with this meddlesome red dragon…

“It takes great audacity, or great stupidity, to doze off in the midst of a battle!”

“B-be silent! I can handle small fry like these half-asleep!”

Since then, she and I had fought together on numerous occasions. To be more precise, it seemed she had taken it upon herself to look after me… not that I needed her help! Despite being an awful busybody for a dragon, and me having given her mine right off the bat, she had yet to tell me her name. To be fair, all the old-timer dragons had a tendency of being tight-lipped, and she had already made quite sure I knew she was my senior.

When I asked her directly about it, she’d told me it wasn’t in a true dragon’s nature to divulge his name. And what exactly is that supposed to mean? If withholding one’s name, refusing to make conversation, and doing battle with all the enthusiasm of a dead fish is all in the nature of a ‘true’ dragon, you’ll have to excuse me for being a fake!

The feeling of becoming stronger is pleasing; displaying that strength is valiant. Vanquishing enemies is exhilarating, getting injured by them is vexing, and seeing an ally hurt fills one with sorrow. Aren’t these all natural ways to feel? Does aging mean becoming stodgy and stale?

“Don’t speak that way, Michael. Once you’ve lived long enough, you too will comprehend.”

Red would always put an end to our talks this way. She acts high and mighty, but she’s really only got a trifling two thousand years on me.

Red aside, though, it was Black who really rubbed me the wrong way. He was a black dragon about the same age as Red and as laconic as all old dragons. What set him apart was his absolutely brutal way of tearing through opponents. I’m attracted to strength, so I tried being friendly, but he just flat-out ignored me. Seriously, how annoying!

“Lost in thought again, are we? It’s not bad to exercise your mind, but there’s a time and a place for it.”

“Be silent!”

Sure enough, it was not good to get distracted in battle. In fact, there was nothing more dangerous. Yet I didn’t appreciate her pointing it out, so I tried to divert attention away from myself by changing the subject:

“Tell me, Red. When do you suppose this battle of ours will ever end?”

As I spoke, I realized I had actually been wanting to ask this exact question for a very long time. I've killed more than I could ever hope to count, piling up enough corpses to fill whole mountains. And yet it went on. The fighting never stopped or even slowed down. The enemy just kept coming and coming.

What were we fighting, anyway? Of course I knew who we were fighting; I didn't mean it in the sense I was unaware of the identity of our foes. What I meant was… ah, it's hard for me to put into words. How frustrating.

"Michael. None of us, not even the eldest, can remember when this battle began. So we have no means of knowing when it may end…"

Red began to say, but her words got cut off, and my entire field of vision when white.

"…dreaming again, was I?"

How strange. I dreamt a dream within a dream. A dream of a distant battle, long past…

"What's wrong?"

I heard a voice from atop my back inquire. It was that of the human riding upon me. Humans were creatures that began to appear sometime after those battles had ended. Yes, that's right. The battles I had thought might continue eternally came all at once to an abrupt close. Perhaps that is not even the right way to phrase it; the conflict which had defined our existences as dragons up until that point had not merely ended, but been completely destroyed. What I had been dreaming of was the exact moment it had ceased to exist.

What made my vision go white was an explosion. What kind of magic it was, where it came from and why, I have little idea. Perhaps it was some power gone haywire; suffice it to say, the devastation it wrought was tremendous. It caused all trace of our countless enemies to vanish, and the very face of the earth to change. It even took out more than half of us dragons. The ones who did survive did so thanks only to the natural durability of our bodies protected by the hearty armor of our scales. The skies, once so crowded, felt impossibly wide. There had been enough of us to blot out the sun, but now it was rare to encounter another of our kind. Red and Black both survived, but I had seen neither in quite some time.

The surface of the earth became crowded instead. Soon it was teeming with creatures known as humans and their derivatives, subhumans. They reproduced at an astounding rate and came to far outnumber the insects and puppets I used to fight. But their lives were short and their bodies weak. What I'd consider a light blow was enough to make them stop moving. The one riding me now would also die before long, just as every other human I'd ever fought with had.

That's right. In spite of their weakness, humans were almost constantly fighting. It's as if they delighted in shortening their already finite lifespans. I couldn't comprehend it. Perhaps it was out of a sense of curiosity, then, that I sometimes aided them in their battles on a whim.

"Michael."

The voice of the human on my back was trembling, if faintly. Was he frightened? Rather weak-willed, for a man.

“I’m sorry… I dragged you into all this.”

“What do you take me for? I will not abide your looking down upon me. Do you think you, a mere mortal, could hope to involve me in matters against my own will? I chose to fight with you. In the first place, human skirmishes mean little more to a dragon than do those of an ant’s. You cannot know of the battlefields I have traversed in my long life, of the corpses I’ve left in my wake…”

I heard him apologize again. This is what irritated me about humans.

“We attack! Prepare yourself!”

I descended upon the fortress below me which, from my eyes, resembled a child’s toy, and cast my fire breath down upon the soldiers who lined its walls…

“Another dream…”

That battle had left a bitter aftertaste. Is that why I had dreamt of it especially? But no… all the battles I’d shared with humans have been sour, perhaps because they all end up dying long before me.

That man was little different. Like the fool he was, he continued apologizing to his last breath. What need was there to ask my forgiveness? I always told him how much I couldn’t stand things being repeated, too…

After laying his cold corpse upon a stone cliff I stood for a time beholding him, in something of a daze. I knew perfectly well how fragile humans were, how quick they were to die, and yet… I held the most scorn for myself, who always ended up feeling a sense of loss, regardless.

Unusually enough, and in a show of particularly bad timing, none other than Black passed by then. His eyes met mine for a moment before he continued on his way, as brusque as ever. Within them I saw ridicule, but also a sense of pity, as if we were chiding me for letting humans into my heart. I didn’t need to be told.

Whether they win or lose, all the awaits man is death. Even should they momentarily grasp at glory, it is for a blink of an eye. How meaningless, then, is human conflict. But is it really? Does what I’ve said apply only to human beings? What meaning was there in the battle we dragons waged? Looking back on those days, even the old timers I found so agitating seemed nostalgic. If not for our battle, how many more would stood be alive, having grown all the more crotchety and ill-humored with age?

“Don’t speak that way, Michael. Once you’ve lived long enough, you too will comprehend.”

I remembered Red’s words. Though she was only a little older than me, she had understood far better. To live long means to lose much… it means to be left behind, to be alone, to keep nothing.

Perhaps the reason I continued aiding humans was because, somewhere in my heart, I wondered… no, hoped… they could give me something. Those creatures, so desperate to whittle down what little time afforded to them by taking up arms… maybe they knew something we long-lived dragons did not.

But it was all the same in the end. No matter how I fought, nothing remained. Nothing was gained.

"Where is this? Is anyone there?"

I realized I was surrounded by a deep darkness. I felt neither the presence of the living or the dead within it. There was nothing.

"Is no one… no one here?"

Hmph. I'm certain this is yet another dream I'll awaken soon enough from… most likely in the midst of yet another battle. More battles? I've grown weary of fighting. Battles are no different from dreams. They all fade in the end… into nothing. Zero…

"Ow 115 wow!"

Something hit the bottom of my chin, where it's sensitive. This time I really, truly awoke.

"Honestly. Do you ever toss and turn!"

I'd been kicked by the human I'd most recently become acquainted with. A woman who went by the name of Zero. She was crude and violent, ate like a hog and could never stop running her mouth. She did not fear me; in fact, she had a tendency of addressing me in tones quite inflammatory. And on top of everything, she was a terrible sleeper. Oh, how she punched and kicked… I didn't imagine it was normal even by human standards.

But all this peaked my interest, as well. She was very different from the humans I'd interacted with in the past. She would be; after all, she was out to kill all of her sisters. I don't suppose there are many humans out there capable of doing that.

I knew my time with her would be short. She, too, would fade away, leaving me behind. In that respect alone she was exactly like the rest. But I didn't care. I'd decided to see her through her task and to the moment of her death. That was, after all, the promise we'd made. After this woman kills her sisters, I'd…

"I will keep my word, no matter what happens. I swear it on my pride as a member of the mighty race of dra- ow! You kicked me again! How many times have I told you to let me finish speaking-"

I heard her snoring. She slept more deeply than any dragon I'd ever known. …well, no matter. At least she never failed to keep me amused.

Weapon Stories

(Accord's Novella)

Busy, busy, busy! Really, I'm so busy. I feel like I could just fall over! It's not like I don't already have my hands full with my usual duties of stocking, repairing and pricing merchandise. To have to refurbish my shop in time for its reopening on top of all that… even if I had a whole army of me, it wouldn't be enough!

Oh, hello there. My name is Accord, and I'm a weapon seller by trade.

Hm? Who am I talking to?

Now, now… let's not sweat the details.

In any case, today I have to inspect the weapons I have in stock, price them appropriately and put them out on display before I can be ready to open tomorrow. And if the weapon seller Accord isn't selling weapons, why… she'd just be a plain old Accord!

Now, let's see… I'm searching for this weapon's weapon story. Here it is.

You see, weapons with colorful histories often come complete with a weapon story detailing how they were made and used until now. They can be quite interesting! For example, here's the one on this sword with the serrated edge:

This swords rends through both an opponent's weapon and flesh with its jagged blade.

If you wield it for too long, your fingers will begin to go numb, and the more blood drawn with it, the whiter your body will become until you are left unable to move…

Hundreds of years ago, a black-skinned knight used this sword to claim many victories.

As time went on, his dark skin changed into a waxy white…

Eventually the knight succeeded in taking the head of an enemy commander in a great battle for the honor of his country. But by then his body had become so light as to be transparent, and no one could see he was there…

My, wasn't that scary? I wonder how true it is, though… a sword turning a person invisible doesn't sound very realistic… A-A-AHHHH! My arm! My arm! My left arm! It's vanishing together with the sword! I can't believe it, but apparently the story was 100% fact! This sword is cursed! I have to stop talking long enough to drop it!

…excuse me. I got a little flustered. Anyway, it seems this sword is a bit too dangerous to put on sale. If I could just figure out some way to break the curse on it… but that's sure to take time. It could take years, even. Well, I can be patient… it's not as if this is my only sword in stock.

Moving on… this weapon is strangely shaped, don't you think? A round ring with a handle. That's odd enough, but look! It's covered in spikes. How is one supposed to use this, exactly? Just walking around with it seems dangerous. Heaven help anyone near you if you just started swinging it around all willy-nilly! You'd end up hurting both your allies and yourself if you weren't careful. Well, I suppose if you're one of those types who doesn't mind a little pain… Let me take a look at its weapon story. Hm? Hmmm? Where'd I put it, now? Oh, found it.

Once upon a time, there were three children who always played together…

Oh dear. Now that I look more closely, this weapon is covered in blood stains. As if it weren't foreboding enough already… Chilling, really. And doesn't blood rust the blade? I ought to try and get it off before selling it. I'll keep it in back until then. I don't think a weapon this creepy would fit the mood of a store reopening very well, anyway…

Okay, next…

If we're strictly speaking aesthetics, I think spears are the best-looking. Now, I'm not saying swords and gauntlets don't look nice either. It's just that spears are so stylish. It's the length that really makes them stand out. Take a look at this one here, for example. The craftsmanship is beautiful enough to make you swoon, isn't it? Its weapon story is pretty dramatic, too. Here's a sample:

A long time ago, there was a dragon who could not fly...

…that's how it starts. Doesn't the opening alone make you feel excited? Just holding a spear like this in your hands makes you want to start swinging it around. You know, with a big battle cry. Yah! Yeah, like that. Yah! YAH! …AHHH!! Oh, what have I done?! I've gotten the spear stuck deep in the wall! I've got to pull it back out! What a pain…! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. There's a crack in the head now. I've got to mend it… but that will take time, too, won't it? If it were the anywhere else that was damaged I could fix it myself, but when it comes to the artisan spear head… I have no choice but to enlist the services of a proper blacksmith.

Honestly! Even though I'm already so busy, here I am, making holes in walls, damaging my own precious merchandise... I'm such a dunce! I'm going to go sit myself down in the corner for awhile and reflect on my stupidity.

...while I'm here, I may as well inspect the rest of the weapons. Like this sword:

A blacksmith who's entire family had been slaughtered by a terrible ogre...

Stop reading! I thought this sounded familiar… it's a weapon story I penned myself! My fan weapon story! How embarrassing! No, no more of that. Also, this weapon appears to be under a seal. If broken, the ghost of a sorcerer will come tumbling out… awfully dangerous, that. I'd better apply an additional seal before putting it up for sale. I hope I can manage a decent one. Oh dear, this is going to take time, too, isn't it...

What's next?

A commander longs to affirm his death...

Changing his feelings into the tears of heaven and earth...

His blood flows from darkness into light...

The teachings rob old life, yet also grant life anew...

Err… that didn't make a lick of sense, did it? What was the person who wrote this thinking? It may be a weapon story, but it's still a story, so it should be written to be at least semi-understandable, don't you agree? Also, the head of this spear is slightly bent. You wouldn't notice unless you looked very, very closely, but... even it's just a bit, damage is damage. I can't sell it like this. I'll send it out for repair along with the other spear.

Speaking of poorly written weapon stories, the one for this next sword takes the cake:

Iron Iron Iron Iron Iron Iron Iron...

Seriously, what is this? I'd like to see the face of the guy who wrote it. I'd have him sit in the corner a while himself. That aside, I don't think I can sell this weapon, either. I mean, it's broken... oh, but... it might be more attractive this way? It's very eye-catching; a real object d'art, if you know what I mean. Perhaps it'd be all right... no, no, damaged goods are damaged goods! But... on an

aesthetic level... then it might be fine to… ah, I can't decide. I'll put it aside until I can come to a decision. This other one's rusted, so it's a no go. That leaves me with... um... huh?

In the end, the only weapon suitable for putting up for sale is this one sword that sort of resembles a cleaver. Ah… no matter how I try to look at it, a weapon seller with only one measly sword for sale is kind of a flop, huh?

Depending on your point of view, though... perhaps one sword really is enough. In the first place, weapons are expensive. Even if I struggle to put a bunch up for sale at once, it's not likely they'll all get bought together. It might be better business, then, to have one especially well-made, easy-to use-product available. Quality before quantity, as they say.

Also, weapons are tools. They're made to be used. As a weapon seller, even if my entire stock gets bought out, while I'd hardly say no to the gold, it would make me sad if most of them never got to see any action… in the end, I'd be most happy if this one sword got used to the fullest. That is how I honestly feel.

Okay! That's the plan, then. I'll have my customer unlock the maximum potential of this sword. And by the time she's finished doing that, the other weapons will be ready to buy... and there may be new ones, to boot! Now, to put this sword, 'The Roar of the Condemned', on display... its unusual name and appearance really give it some extra oomph! Now to rustle up a few healing items... and I'm all set.

Now, then. I must get going. Aside from getting the store ready, I have other various jobs to do. My work is never done! Although it may be a bit strange not to have the owner around on the opening day... it can't be helped. I'm sure it'll all be all right as long as I leave a note. Probably. Let's see… dear customer... this shop sells weapons and items, but due to the owner being otherwise occupied… okay, looks good. Let me go hang this on the door.

Mirror Mirror

(Brother One's Novella)

***Note: The following story contains EXTREME *Drakengard 3* spoilers, it is recommended that you read this story after playing through Branch A of the game.**

I had to be here.

But I couldn't stay.

I had to come back here.

But I couldn't remain.

All for the sister who watched over me…

I had to be here.

My room is located in a tower in the cathedral. It's small, with only a few things in it: my bed, a little chair, the iron door, stone walls and a single window located so far up I can't see the sky from it. Yet it was my entire world.

Only my sister knew of me and my room. I've never spoken with anyone other than her and her dragon, Gabriella. And Gabriella mostly spoke only to Sister, not to me. She had a rough way of speaking and could be mean to me, but I didn't hate her, because Sister really seemed to love her.

Sometimes Sister would take me out on Gabriella's back and we'd fly through the sky together. We'd travel to battlefields. The world was still all messed up back then and Sister had lots of enemies to fight. I'd help her. I'm not sure how long we were fighting for, but it was also to help me get stronger. I had to be strong to defeat Zero. If Sister lost to Zero, then it was my job to kill her.

"Don't worry; you're my brother. You can do it."

Sister probably said that to reassure me, but she didn't realize I'd figured out something important. If I had to kill Zero, that'd mean Sister had already been killed by her. I didn't want that. I didn't want Sister to die. If Sister went away, who'd visit me? Who'd talk to me? If Sister went away, I…

The reason I was frowning wasn't because I was scared to fight. It was because I never wanted to have to use the sword made of dragon fang that Sister gave to me. I didn't want the day where I'd have to leave my room to ever come. I wanted Sister to keep visiting me there like she'd always done, holding me gently in her arms each time, forever and ever. That was my only wish. But…

But I couldn't stay.

Because the day did come. I knew it was the day my sister was going to fight Zero to the death when she came to see me with a strained expression.

"It's okay. I'll do just as you taught me, Sister."

Sister looked surprised when I said this since she hadn't said anything herself yet. But I could understand her without the use of words. I'm not as smart as her, so I can't understand things that are too difficult, but I could always tell what she was feeling… whether she was happy or sad or mad… I could tell just by looking. I'm her twin, after all. Of course I'd be able to. Of course I'd know… that even if she beat Zero, I'd never see her again, because she was planning to die either way. I knew, so just that once, I tried to stop her. I threw a tantrum, sobbing and begging her not to go.

"It's all right. I won't lose."

Sister looked troubled. I hadn't meant to trouble her. I just wanted her to understand that I knew we wouldn't be seeing each other again, that this was our last meeting… I wanted her to know that I understood everything, and not to worry. Sister, I understood so much more than you realized…

Sister was killed by Zero, and I killed Zero just as I was instructed to. Now all the Intoners had been slain. But Sister, you didn't tell me what I should do after that. You didn't tell me what I should do or where I should go. My head was so full with how you were going to die and how I had to kill

Zero that I didn't think to ask. I regretted that now, but it was too late. Sister was dead so she couldn't tell me.

What caught my eye as I stood amongst their corpses was one of the stained glass windows of the room we were in. It had been cracked, but it still shone beautifully in the light. It gave me an idea. I'd start a new religion in my sister's name. I'd re-create this church as a place of worship for her. I couldn't think of anything better than that. For my sister… I tried leaving, for her. But the world outside was too big, too scary, and without her, too lonely for me by myself. So I ran back here, to my room, where I'd be safe. Where I didn't have to do anything at all.

I had to come back here.

No one knows about this room. As her trump card, Sister couldn't have anyone knowing about me. She probably didn't even tell her other sisters. She cast a spell on the door so it couldn't be seen from the outside, to make sure no one accidentally opened it. It wasn't locked, you see; Sister wasn't keeping me prisoner. But I never thought to leave on my own. I never wanted to. I'd only go out if Sister was taking me somewhere.

But she won't be taking me anywhere, anymore. So the first thing I did when I came back was to make it so the door would never open again. I destroyed it from the inside so I'd never have to go back outside. There is nothing for me out there. I may have been able to help my sister, but I can't do anything on my own, aside from killing Zero. Reading the books she'd given me, practicing my sword work… that's how I used to pass the time in my room between Sister's visits. But she'll never come to visit me again. I'll never see her ever again.

No! I want to see her! I want to see my sister! I want to see her, I want to see her, I want to see her…!

Ah… that's it. I can't really see her again, but I can see her in a way. Since I was made from her, we look the same. We have the same face. So if I put on some of her clothes and stand in front of the mirror, then…

Just as I thought! We're mirror images of each other. It's as if Sister is really standing before me.

"I wanted to see you, too." Said my sister from the mirror.

But even though she was right in front of me now… even though it seemed as if I could touch her… all my fingertips felt was the cold glass of the mirror. She's there, just beyond it. Why can't I step through myself? Why do I have to stay here, on the other side of the looking glass?

Why do I have to be all alone? Why did sister leave me behind? No… she hadn't meant to. I'll bet she meant to take me with her.

Sister had to kill Zero, and she had to die right after, since Intoners harbor the flower that will destroy the world if left to take seed in their bodies. Sister wanted to destroy the flower for good, but the flower will try to preserve itself. That's where Zero made a mistake. So that she wouldn't fail in the same way, Sister came up with a plan to make sure that regardless of who survived their battle, the flower would be wiped out. I was that plan. In this room, Sister would have me practice

killing Zero. She drew the shape of a person on the wall and crossed an X over where the heart would be, so I wouldn't miss when the time came… so I'd be able to take Zero out with just one thrust. Soon a hole opened up in the wall where the X had been, so it was like I was actually stabbing through someone. I'd stab the hole over and over… swiftly, precisely… again and again until Sister told me to stop.

But I wasn't training just to kill Zero, was I? I was practicing to kill you, too. If you'd survived… if the flower had somehow kept you alive… you'd stand behind the wall and have me stab straight through the hole like I always did. And you'd die. If I had to kill you myself, I couldn't keep on living. I'd have killed myself right after. Since I was made from you, the power of the flower isn't as strong in me and I'd probably die easily. And once I had, all traces of the flower would be eliminated from this world. That's right… Sister had never intended to leave me alone. She trusted that I'd follow after her. After all, I'd had the one weapon capable of killing Intoners. I'm not a true Intoner, but a normal sword couldn't kill me. I know, because I tried using one on myself as soon as I'd come back to my room. I'd forgotten the sword made of dragon fang back where I'd killed Zero. I'm so stupid. I went and destroyed the door, so I can't go back for it. I can't leave. I have to stay here, in this safe room. I made a mistake. Everything is my fault.

Sister, please scold me. Tell me what a bad brother I am. I am bad. So why won't you scold me? The Sister reflected in the mirror was silent, regarding me with sorrowful eyes, as if about to cry. I know that expression. I'd seen it before. It was the same face she made whenever she was in bed with me. I never understood why she looked so pained while what we were doing made me feel so good. When I asked, she told me it was because it was wrong. That siblings shouldn't be doing what we were together. But that even knowing that, she couldn't stop herself. Her voice was so sad. I didn't understand. If it's wrong for siblings to do it together, then does that mean it's okay for strangers to? That seems much wronger to me. When I told her that, she looked at a loss for words for a moment before making such a gentle expression it made my heart skip a beat.

"Yes… then it's all right, if it's with you…"

Sister, your face right now looks just like it did then.

"Really?"

Yes. You're even furrowing your eyebrows a bit. That's a habit of yours. Did you realize?

"No, I didn't."

I didn't think so. I didn't want to tell you.

"Why not?"

That's just the same, too! The way you tilt your head when asking me a question! I memorized all your expressions and tics… I wanted to keep them all to myself. I noticed things about you even you didn't. And not just on your face, either… the way your body moves, the tone of voice you'd use, even the way you'd breathe… I loved them all.

"I… I can’t stand this…!"

Feeling agitated, I shook my head from side to side the way I would when throwing a tantrum. Heh heh… it looks cute when you do it, Sister. No one but me will ever see that. Now you belong just to me… Yes, that’s the face…

So I can see you whenever I want. It’s easy, since we’re twins. I can’t believe I didn’t realize it sooner.

"I won’t go anywhere."

That’s right… you promised. I remember the night I woke up crying after having a nightmare… Sister, you were up. I guess you were probably trying to leave while I was still sleeping, but when you saw me upset you stayed with me until dawn, holding my hand and comforting me.

"I’m here with you."

Really? You won’t go anywhere? You’ll stay with me?

"Yes… always."

I don’t have the weapon that could kill me anymore. I can’t die, so neither can you. I didn’t make a mistake after all. If I live, then so will you. And all I want is for you to live. I don’t care if everyone else in the world has to die. Is that wrong? Does that make me bad?

"Of course not. You’re a good little brother."

Sister, listen. I’m going to make a new religion, just for you. For you, and… and Gabriella, too. I remember how you loved her.

"Not just her. Gabriel, too. I loved her even after she reincarnated."

That’s right. So I’ll create a church that will venerate all three of you.

"Tell me more."

Sure! See, thanks to Zero, the Capital got all messed up, right? But I’m going to build everything back up again, from scratch. Then I’ll instate this new religion, and gather followers. Oh yeah, and I should come up with a symbol for it, one that represents us. How about this?

"This might work."

You think so, too? The image of Sister and I pressing our cheeks together, as if we’ve become one… as if we’re reflecting one another.

"It almost looks like we only have three eyes between us."

You’re right. Really, I want to become even more as one… I want the division between us to collapse, and for us to melt together… so that we’ll never have to be parted again. I don’t care if we can never go back to being separate. I want us to be One… Ah… but…

But I couldn’t remain.

This room that no one knew about got discovered. Destroying the door broke Sister’s spell and so it and the hole in the wall were found.

"Lady One! To think you were here all along…!"

Strangers broke down the wall and stood before me. I suppose they were the clergy of the church.

"We’re so glad you’re safe!"

Every one of them had tears in their eyes. So I… I answered like this:

"I’m sorry to have worried you all. Everything is all right now. My wounds have all healed."

My sister (My brother) is always with me. We are One.

"Shall we go?"

Now she (he) and I will go outside. Together...

"I plan to build the church anew."

"Lady One?"

Now the two of us shall become the harbingers of a new faith.

"To honor the Watchers..."

I’m certain many will gather to venerate the Intoners and the Angels they called forth.

All for the sister who watched over me...

Special thanks to everyone who went through the hassle of translating all of this material for the enjoyment of the fans. Your efforts are very much appreciated.

And of course, thanks to Studio Cavia and Yoko Taro for bringing us such a fantastic franchise, keep up the good work, Weird Skeleton Man!